

Banking on Her

Harry reckons his future is bleak if he stays at Hogwarts. The Tri-Wizard tournament offers him a fail-safe way of escaping his perceived destiny, that is until Harry discovered the hidden costs.

Disclaimer: Since I'm not the owner of these characters, I may do things with them that you don't like or agree with. Sorry in advance but that's the nature of fan fiction. To do otherwise kind of defeats the purpose of fan fiction, and copying JKR word for word would certainly see a lawsuit heading in my direction.

Chapter 1

Hermione Granger was sitting in her usual corner of the Hogwarts library, her table piled high with books. What stood out as being unusual with this scene was that the girl in question couldn't seem to concentrate on any of those precious books. Professor McGonagall had just announced that there would be a Yule Ball as part of the Tri-Wizard Tournament before asking Harry to wait behind after class. Hermione was currently racking her brain to come up with a reason that her best friend could be in trouble, she was also coming up empty.

The group of giggling girls who were surprisingly hanging out in the library wasn't helping her concentration either. Hermione couldn't understand why they would come to a library to sit and giggle amongst themselves.

Hermione's gaze swiveled and locked on to her best friend who had just entered. Harry headed straight for her though appeared to be deep in thought, something was clearly troubling him. Hermione assumed she was about to discover what McGonagall wanted. After a quick greeting, he sat beside her and Hermione's curiosity could be denied no longer.

"So, what did Professor McGonagall keep you back for?"

"Oh she was just informing me that, as a champion, I need a date for this ball they're now springing on us."

Harry was silent for a moment and Hermione assumed he was going through his potential dates in his head. The Gryffindor witch held out

some hope she would be in there somewhere but had no intention of dropping any hints.

"Hermione, there is something I need to ask you?"

Hermione's heart was racing as she was sure he was going to ask her to the ball. She was trying to compose herself so she didn't pounce on him in her enthusiasm to say yes.

"What do you know about banks?"

Hermione was actually staggered and left stammering over that question. "Banks, not ball?"

"Banks Hermione, I had intended to ask you about this but McGonagall just moved the timetable up with that announcement earlier. I'm not asking about the ball because I won't be here for it."

Hermione was shaking her head as if to try and clear it. "Ok Harry, you're going to have to explain that one to me. You've never left Hogwarts at Christmas."

"I've come to realise that, if I want to have a future, then I need to get out of here. Otherwise, I don't see myself reaching eighteen. I know full well what you think of divination but even the skeptical Hermione Granger has to admit all the signs are pointing in that direction."

Harry even thinking of leaving Hogwarts had struck Hermione dumb.

"Every year since I've set foot in this place, I've almost died. Not once has my life been saved by a professor. Mostly it's been down to dumb luck and that luck can't hold out forever. This bloody tournament is the last straw for me."

Panic kicked Hermione's brain back into gear as she tried to come up with valid reasons why her best friend shouldn't leave. "You can't leave until you've at least sat your OWL's. Do you think Professor Dumbledore will just let you walk away from Hogwarts? You know he keeps a close eye on you."

Harry gave her a smile that did things to her insides. "What is the full name of this school?"

Hermione answered at once. "Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...Harry no!"

"It's the only option I've been able to come up with that doesn't see me leaving this place horizontal and covered in a white sheet. I keep having these dreams of me lying dead on the grass..."

"Harry, you need to tell Dumbledore or at least Sirius about those dreams. Are they the same as the ones you had earlier in the summer? Did your scar hurt?"

"Hell no, no, no and no. Dumbledore leaves me scrambling about in the dark so I'm telling him nothing. I don't want Sirius placing himself in any more danger because of me, these dreams are different and nothing to do with my scar. This is not a spur of the moment thing Hermione."

"How long have you been thinking about this?"

"Since the moment Hagrid took me to see the dragons. Forcing a fourteen year old to face off against a nesting dragon told me everything I need to know. Staying at Hogwarts will only see me die."

Hermione was still struggling to understand and so far Harry hadn't been very convincing. "You took on that dragon and beat it, why didn't you refuse to participate then?"

Harry actually blushed with embarrassment at that question. "I didn't want to give anyone the opportunity to call me a coward. No one who saw the last task could ever call me that now."

Hermione was shocked that he could even consider that as a valid reason for facing a dragon. Harry took advantage of her silence to lay out his plans. He needed her to see that he had actually thought this through.

"The reason that I asked about banks was my parents left me an inheritance, I need to get it out of Gringotts while I still can. I don't know much about goblin banking but even less about normal banks. I need to get my money safe so none of the Dursleys can get their

greedy mitts on it. If I'm no longer magical, I wonder if they'll start treating me as normal?"

Hermione laid her head on his shoulder, fighting the tears at the shitty life her best friend had lived. "Could you really give up your magic Harry?"

"Being a live muggle or a dead wizard is not a hard choice for me Hermione." Harry wasn't finished laying out his plans though.

"I know I've missed years of normal school but, if I work hard, I can hopefully earn enough qualifications to get into a catering school. Cooking is something I enjoy doing and my inheritance will hopefully give me a leg-up to opening my own restaurant. I figure even Ron would venture into the muggle world if there was a free meal in it for him. I'm also banking heavily on you staying in touch?"

This was where Hermione lost her fight, tears began running down her cheeks. She didn't know how to tell him the next bit but simply had to. "Having been there with you or sitting there watching as you nearly lost your life on numerous occasions, I really can't fault your logic. I also can't fault your method of leaving, you can't attend Hogwarts without any magic."

Harry's smile was back at her words but that wouldn't last long, it was breaking her heart yet she had to tell him. "When Hagrid gave you your Hogwarts letter, I'll bet he never told you what the procedure was if someone wanted to leave the magical world?"

Harry's smile disappeared as he lifted her head and saw she was crying. This could only be bad news. "Professor McGonagall was asked by my dad what would happen if I didn't like Hogwarts and wanted to leave. She told us the magical world needed to be kept secret and all three of us would have a spell cast on us to make us forget all about Hogwarts and magic."

After his experience with Lockhart, Harry was well acquainted with that particular spell. He now felt sick to his stomach.

Hermione's tears were now hitting the table as she spelled it out for him. "I would love to come and sit in your restaurant Harry, but I don't think I could. It would kill me to be sitting there and you not

knowing who I was. I may be a Gryffindor but I know I'm not that brave."

Harry's arms were now around her shoulders as he pulled her into a comforting hug. "Why does my life seem like its one step forward and then three steps back? I'm not a muggleborn though, would they still do that to me?"

"The boy-who-lived deliberately sacrificing his magic, rather than compete in a ministry sponsored event. What do you think?"

"I think they would oblivate the shit out of me! I need another page to my plan, and I need it quickly. I still have no intention of taking part in the second task so that puts the pressure on. I'm going to go and beat the snot out of something and see if that will help, will you be ok?"

Hermione was trying to smile as she wiped her eyes, she nodded to him. Harry's next comment put a brilliant and genuine smile on her face.

"You do know that, had I been going to the ball, I would have been down here like a shot to ask you to be my date?"

Hermione took her courage, and Harry's head, in her hands and kissed him on the cheek. "You better believe I would have said yes."

She watched him leave as a new determination took hold of her, she would do anything to help him achieve what he wanted. Harry was now ready to ask her out on a date, there was no bloody way she intended to let anyone mess with that.

Hermione wasn't sure how long she sat there after Harry left but she was drawn out of her thoughts by her name being mangled in a foreign accent. She glanced up to see a certain Bulgarian Tri-Wizard champion staring down at her. He'd apparently been trying to capture her attention for some time.

"The name's Hermione, what can I do for you?"

"You have been crying, who upset you?"

"Oh I was just having a discussion with a friend."

"Not a very good friend if made you cry?"

This Bulgarian was now really starting to annoy her. "I'll have you know he's the best friend in the world. Now again, what can I do for you?"

"I wish you to go to the ball with me?"

Hermione was again struggling to believe what she was hearing, this was turning into quite a day. She was also certain that it wasn't just his poor grasp of English that made his question seem more like a command. The confident smirk he was now wearing really annoyed the hell out of her. His entire body language screamed that he just expected every witch to fall at his feet.

"I meet you at the entrance to the dance, yes?"

"No."

"No?"

"That's what I said, no."

His smirk had been replaced by a dumbfounded look, Hermione reckoned Mr Krum wasn't used to people saying no to him. "Why no?"

"Really? Well, I don't know you, you're about eighteen which is far too old for me. I have no intention of spending Christmas Eve with someone who I don't know and can't even say my name properly. That enough reasons for you?"

The older boy was now really struggling, Hermione was sure getting a knock-back was a whole new experience for him. "But I want you to go with me?"

"Well that's just tough. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go and find my friend."

"A friend who makes you cry? I would never do that."

Hermione lost it at this point, after the day she was having, it was hardly a surprise. She had no intention of explaining her relationship with Harry to Krum or anyone else. Her voice though was far too loud for what passed as acceptable behavior in a library. "You will never be my friend either, stop bothering me and go ask someone else. Stay away from me."

Hermione paid no attention to the number of girls who were now glaring at her though she couldn't help but see that Madam Pince had left her desk to investigate the commotion in her domain. Hermione got out of there fast.

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Hermione headed for the unused classroom they had found tucked well away from the well travelled routes through the castle. They had been hanging out here so Harry could practice his spells for the tournament. She figured that if he wanted to be alone for the moment, this is where he would head. The noises coming from the room saw Hermione increase her pace. When she heard the unnatural screams and screeching it was time to run, she burst into the classroom and was stopped by what greeted her.

"No (bang) bloody (bang) way (bang) are (bang) you (bang) taking (bang) Hermione (bang) from (bang) me."

Hermione could only stand and stare at the sight before her. Harry was kneeling on the stone floor with a heavy looking hammer in his hands. Each word he spoke was enforced by the hammer pounding into the golden object that probably was once an egg. The screeching was dying off the more he pounded it flat.

He appeared rather embarrassed that she'd found him like this but seemed determined to make the best of it. "Hi Hermione, just releasing some tension here by pounding the snot out of this thing. You know, it really works. Want to give it a try?"

"I hate to ask this Harry, but why are you destroying the golden egg? I know you said you didn't want to compete in the next task but is this really necessary?"

"I guess you could say I've solved it, it's no longer a puzzle to me."

Hermione just stood there, awaiting the real answer.

Harry knew her too well to think she would be fobbed off with that. "To my mind, this is me finishing with the tournament. There's no going back now."

"Are you even allowed to do that? Won't they want it back?"

"I was almost killed getting this thing away from that nesting dragon, I've earned it. There is also the fact that this is a golden egg, it should be worth something."

Harry could see the disappointment in Hermione's eyes and tried desperately to reassure her. "It's not that I'm greedy Hermione, I just want to get away from the Dursleys as soon as I can. The more funds I have available, the easier that will be."

Hermione couldn't argue that Harry had certainly earned the golden egg. She also couldn't argue that he would be hard pushed to compete in the second task after pounding the clue flat with a hammer. "I understand Harry, I would do everything I could to get away from the Dursleys too."

He couldn't help but smile before resuming his pounding. "A couple more minutes and I'll have shut this thing up permanently. Then we can head back to the library and begun to figure out how I can keep my memories."

"NO!"

The hammer halted mid swing as Harry stared at her, obviously awaiting an explanation to that outburst.

Hermione was trying to conceal her blush as she told him what happened. "Victor Krum asked me to the Yule Ball and I rather made a spectacle of myself."

The hammer then continued its strike, though now with considerably more force than it previously had. This powerful pounding continued as Harry spoke to her between strikes. "That's great Hermione, I would hate for you to miss out just because I'm not going."

Hermione could see how much it hurt him to say that, her heart melted that he would put her happiness before his own. She decided to put a stop to his line of thought immediately. "Harry, there is only one person I wanted to go to the ball with. I told Krum no."

Harry managed to appear pleased and puzzled at the same time. "If you told him no, how was that making a spectacle of yourself? Especially one that would leave you avoiding the library?"

"Well, he didn't want to take no for an answer..."

The hammer now struck the former egg with enough force to assure there would never be a peep out of it again. Harry stood with the hammer still clutched in his hand, a new target clearly on his mind.

Hermione's hand was on his chest but it took a kiss to his cheek to calm him enough to listen. "Harry, it was nothing and I dealt with it. Trust me, Mr Krum crashed and burned. I got the distinct impression he's not used to people saying no to him."

Harry used the fingers of his free hand to rub his cheek where Hermione had just kissed him. "He's obviously never met Miss Hermione Granger before."

"Well, when your best friend is the most famous wizard in the country, how can a mere quidditch player hope to impress me? You're a pretty hard act to follow Mr Potter. Trolls, basilisks, dementors and dragons. How could Krum think what he can do with his broomstick could ever match up to that?"

"Did Hermione Granger just crack a joke?"

"Well, if Harry Potter can become a chef, what's to stop me becoming a comedian? I just hope your cooking is better than your egg beating. It might be a lovely golden colour but it's as lumpy as last week's porridge."

Harry couldn't help but laugh before giving the egg a final few whacks. It was now silent and of a shape that would fit neatly into his book bag. That's where he placed it as both then headed for Gryffindor tower.

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They arrived there just in time to spot their head of house leaving the portrait hole. McGonagall even gave them a smile in passing, noticing how close they were. Ron was sitting playing chess with Dean when Hermione called out to him.

"Hey Ron, what did we miss?"

"Oh McGonagall was just telling us the holiday procedure has changed this year. With the ball, she reckoned that it would be easier to write the names of those going home, rather than those staying. I can't imagine anyone wanting to go home for Christmas and miss the ball." At that, Ron glanced up from the chessboard and saw Harry writing his name on the list.

He was shaking his head as he admonished his mate. "Didn't you listen to a thing I said? It's only those going home who put their names on the list, not those staying."

"Heard you the first time Ron."

"You're a champion, you need to go."

"Says who?"

Ron was now on his feet. "But who am I going to go with?"

"Please don't take this the wrong way Ron, but I had no intention of asking you to the ball."

Ron rolled his eyes as those currently in the common room were having a good chuckle at his expense. "Hermione, help me out here. We need to talk some sense into...you too?"

Hermione had just added her name to the short list of those going home for Christmas.

"Yes Ron, me too."

Ron walked over to her and placed one hand supportively on her arm. He lowered his voice until only half the common room could hear him. "You shouldn't be so hasty Hermione, I'm sure someone will ask you to the ball. I think Neville was even considering you."

It was not only the words but the condescending tone Ron used that left Hermione deeply hurt. She then felt Ron's hand being forcibly removed from her arm.

"I'll have you know that Hermione has already had two offers to take her to the ball, both of them from champions! I would have thought this year would have taught you to engage that thing you call a brain before opening your mouth, but apparently I was wrong."

Ron was struggling to get his wrist free of Harry's bulldog grip on it, only Hermione's hand on Harry's shoulder saw him release it.

He was embarrassed now that everyone was watching so, as usual, Ron lashed out. "If Diggory and Krum have already asked her then what are you both getting so upset about?"

Hermione pulled Harry away, glad he no longer had that hammer in his hands. She wondered though if hitting Ron in the head would do any harm. The phrase 'two short planks' came to mind. The boy just seemed to get thicker as he got older. She pulled Harry into a private corner and he immediately attempted to apologies.

"You don't need to leave for Christmas just because I am."

"This could be our last Christmas where you actually know who I am Harry, I intend to spend as much of it with you as possible. I hope you don't mind if I invite myself along to Gringotts with you?"

"Mind, I would love it! I'm sorry Hermione, I had no right to broadcast your personal life over the common room. He just got me so mad with the way he casually hurt you. Ron's supposed to be our friend, doesn't he realise that there are loads of guys here who would love to take you to the ball?"

"Ronald Weasleys probably doesn't realise that I'm a girl."

The truth behind that remark saw Harry smile, his next thought raised a chuckle. "If Ron actually believed you had been asked by two champions, I can just imagine him asking our French competitor so you couldn't have one up on him."

That also got a smile from Hermione. "That I'd like to see."

Ron had returned to his chess game but was still seething. When he heard his two friends chuckling, probably at his expense, his anger spilled over. "That's right, laugh at your poor attempt at a joke. Do you honestly think anyone in here believed that two champions had asked Hermione Granger to the ball?"

Hermione jumped in with an answer before Harry could. "Of course your right Ron, haven't you already established that Harry's a lying bastard? Putting his name in the goblet of fire and then claiming he didn't."

The prim and proper Miss Granger actually swearing in public stopped everyone in their tracks. The queen letting one rip while sitting on the throne couldn't have been more shocking to the rest of the Gryffindors.

The silence was broken by her two dorm-mates rushing through the portrait hole. "Hermione, it's all over the castle that you refused to be Victor Krum's date for the ball. He left the library in a right tizzy"

Parvati was looking at her as if she had two heads. "Is it true? Did you really give the Bulgarian Bon Bon a knock-back?"

Hermione's victory smile left Ron with nowhere to go. He sat there and pretended to be concentrating once more on his chess match, his face being as red as his hair kind of gave the game away.

Parvati and Lavender took that smile as a yes. Before they could question her further though, their head of house once more entered the common room.

"Mr Potter, Miss Granger, didn't anyone tell you the new procedures this year? You only write your name on that sheet if you intend to go home for the Christmas holidays."

"Oh we know that professor."

The professor then looked away from Hermione to her real target. "Mr Potter, we had a discussion earlier about your involvement in the Yule Ball. I'd like an explanation to this."

"I would hardly call it a discussion professor, you told me what was expected. My opinion was neither asked for nor wanted."

The professor was clearly trying not to let her frustration show. It was very rare for a student to stand up to Minerva McGonagall, especially one of her own house. "Mr Potter, I explained to you not only the tradition of the Tri-Wizard Tournament but how you would be representing Hogwarts and Gryffindor. Do you really care so little for this house that you would embarrass it like this?"

Harry's temper was only held in check by the grip Hermione now had on his arm. The witch herself was angrier than she'd ever been with her head of house. How dare McGonagall try emotional blackmail on Harry, and in front of most of his housemates too.

Harry managed to answer calmly. "Well professor, I thought that the tradition of the tournament should be maintained. It's called the Tri-Wizard for a reason and having four champions just spoils that."

This saw people attempting to casually seek cover, expecting McGonagall's temper to explode any second now. Harry though wasn't quite finished. "I thought I recently faced a dragon for the honour of Hogwarts and Gryffindor but then again, I have found that people in here have incredibly short memories."

His gaze was directed at Ron as he said that last remark.

"I never entered this tournament and the Yule Ball is not one of the tasks. Why should I turn up there in dress robes, pretending everything is hunky-dory when it so clearly isn't? Our own defense professor thinks my name was placed in that goblet with the sole intention to do me harm, that also seems to have been conveniently forgotten."

"Nothing of the sort has been forgotten Mr Potter. Rest assured, I shall be taking your proposed non attendance up with the headmaster."

"I expected nothing less. I would have preferred if my head of house had taken as much action over those 'Potter Stinks' badges or that bogus Prophet article I was forced to give."

McGonagall's little patience had just run out. "We can discuss that, amongst other things, when you serve your detention with me tonight."

This muted the rest of the house but Harry was undaunted. "I don't recall receiving a detention professor. Could you please remind me when I got it and why?"

"I'm giving you the detention now, for your lack of respect toward your head of house."

He didn't give an inch. "I'm sorry professor, could you be a bit more specific? I can't think of anything I've said that warrants a detention."

"It is this argumentative attitude that has earned you this detention."

"Say no more. I've suffered potions for three and a half years. I thought you were different from Professor Snape though?"

The silence that followed that remark was total, no student dared even to breathe. The Scots professor's lips were pushed together so tight that they disappeared, her expression as stern as any Gryffindor had ever seen it. Considering the Weasley twins were present, that was really saying something. It was always going to be left to McGonagall to break the silence, she didn't disappoint.

"Mr Potter, I think you should accompany me to the headmaster's office, NOW!"

Their head of house spun away toward the portrait hole but Harry didn't immediately follow. Hermione's grip on his arm was tight enough to cause blood flow issues, never mind being able to walk away from her.

Harry caressed her worried face with his free hand. "I need to go Hermione, please don't worry. What are they going to do, expel me? I'm the boy-who-lived and Tri-Wizard champ, they wouldn't dare."

Hermione knew his future plans and smiled at his attempted joke, the smile faltered as she released him to follow McGonagall. Harry had hardly made it through the portrait hole when Ron resumed hostilities.

"Did you hear that? 'I'm the boy-who-lived, they won't expel me' This from the person who supposedly hates his fame?"

Unfortunately for Ron, Hermione wasn't in the mood for any more verbal bashing. Her concern for Harry's situation saw Ron's latest barb push her over the edge. He soon discovered there was an indentation in his left cheek, an indentation caused by Hermione's wand pressing into it.

"Ronald Weasleys, if you do not wish to find yourself transfigured into a spider and then kept in a mirrored box, I would strongly advise you not to say another word. It would also be advisable to stay the hell away from me until you grow up."

Ron couldn't fail to get her point and nodded his acceptance, Hermione then left to go to her dorm. Ron's whispered 'mental that one' was certainly low enough to ensure Hermione never heard it.

Lavender and Parvati watched the witch head off to their shared dorm. Hermione had answered their question by her actions. She turned down a date with Krum because she wanted to go with Harry. It was also blindingly obvious to both girls that a certain Gryffindor seeker felt the same way about her. These things were obvious to everyone, except a certain Ron Weasley.

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Harry was left wondering how wrong this day could go. On arriving at the headmaster's office, he discovered that Snape was already there. His continual sneer as McGonagall described recent events just pissed Harry off even more.

Dumbledore asked the first question. "Why would you wish to go home for Christmas?"

"It's obvious, the boy just wants more attention."

"Sorry Professor Snape but that makes no sense to me. Why would I want to leave if I was looking for more attention?"

"It got you into the headmaster's office."

"I can assure you, being here was not my idea. Who else gets dragged in here because they want to leave the castle for Christmas?"

"You still haven't answered my question Harry?"

"Why would I want to stay here and be gawked at over something I had nothing to do with? Between Halloween, those badges and Skeeter, I've had all the attention I can handle this year. I have no intention of performing any more by taking part in this ball."

McGonagall tried to enquire further and was again shocked by Harry's rebuff. "Do your relatives know your returning for the holidays?"

"Their opinion didn't matter for me coming here. My relatives repeatedly told Hagrid they didn't want me to go to Hogwarts, he ignored them. Next summer they locked my door and put bars on my windows to stop me returning, the Weasleys had to pull the bars off the wall to get me out."

This was news to the three professors but Harry had more. "Third year I couldn't go to Hogsmead because my guardian didn't sign my form and then fourth year I'm told I must compete in a tournament only for adult wizards. It looks to me as if the rules you want are enforced and then those you don't are simply ignored."

Albus was as stumped as his deputy as to where this attitude was coming from. He needed to find out quickly, and preferably without antagonizing the lad any further. "I want you to go away and think on this matter Harry, this is most unlike you."

"It won't change my opinion sir. I really am sick of Hogwarts at the moment and desperately need a break away from the castle." Since he'd been effectively dismissed, Harry got out of there as fast as good manners allowed.

Now that it was only the three of them remaining in the office, Albus turned to his deputy. "Have you any idea what could have brought this on Minerva?"

"Sorry Albus, this was like a bolt from the blue. Miss Granger has also put her name down to go home but my feelings are that action

was in support of Mr Potter. I've said it before Albus, we ask too much of that young man. Trolls and Quirrell, the heir of Slytherin and a basilisk, last year it was Black and Dementors with the tournament this time."

Minerva was clearly worried over this situation and laid it on the line for the headmaster.

"I'll speak to him later but I really think he may have been pushed too far this time Albus. I thought I was going to be physically ill watching him face that dragon, I noticed Miss Granger's reaction was the same."

"Thank you Minerva, please keep a careful eye on him."

It was only after she left that the headmaster turned to his Head of Slytherin. "Well Severus, what did you discover?"

"I got the distinct impression that the boy was being particularly truthful when he said he needed to get away from the castle. I also sensed he's interested in making that particular situation a permanent one."

"He must know that's an impossibility?"

"There is a way that he could walk from the castle without anyone being able to stop him, the tournament handed him an out and I think he has realised that."

The old wizard was glad he was sitting as Severus delivered that blow. "That would be a disaster for us all and must be prevented at any cost. I shall have to consider carefully whether it is advantageous to allow him a return to his relatives or keep him here in the castle. A Christmas with the Dursleys might just be enough to make him change his mind."

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Hermione was heading to the owlery clutching a letter home. Harry had asked her a question she had no answer to, but she knew a man who did. Her dad had ribbed her mercilessly about her two best friends being boys, she hoped he could get over the whole protective father bit to help one of them now. Hermione didn't want

Harry to lose his magic and would be searching every book on magical law she could find. Even if he did though, it wouldn't matter to her. She would still love Harry if he was a muggle, so him forgetting her was not an option she was prepared to even consider. It should be safe to return to the library tomorrow, Hermione Granger seriously needed to hit the books.

A/N Thanks for reading

Last weekend I took part in a charity cycle ride. This left me with an extremely sore rear that prevented me spending hours sitting at my computer. This, and the new story, accounted for the delay but hope to be back to my weekly schedule now.

Chapter 2

Hermione was waiting on Harry to go down to breakfast and mentally arguing with herself at the same time. Their research had Harry focusing on an item called a pensieve, a device that allowed you to store memories. That these items were exceedingly rare and therefore probably prohibitavly expensive didn't dent his enthusiasm.

Hermione herself had come up with a foolproof way to stop the ministry wiping his memories, she just hadn't been able to summon the courage to tell him about it. They had undoubtedly become closer this year but Hermione didn't know if he was anywhere near ready to take the step required to safeguard his memories. It almost felt as if she was trapping him, something she could never be part of. For the last two days every spare moment had been spent trying to find another way but time was running out. Her letter home had born fruit and she really was going to have to come clean with him today. There was only four more days until they boarded the Hogwarts express to take them down to London.

Harry offering a penny for her thoughts saw her almost jump out her skin, she hooked arms with him and they set off for breakfast. They were stopped en route by a clearly worried Neville.

"Eh, guys, you might want to give the Great Hall a miss this morning."

This comment was met by two "Why's?"

"Well Rita Skeeter has been up to her tricks again."

"Neville, I don't know what more she could say about me, and I don't really care."

"It's not you Harry, this time it's Hermione. There's a really bad article in the Witch Weekly that everyone's reading."

"Well I have no intention of letting that woman ruin my breakfast, c'mon Harry."

Hermione still had him by the arm as they entered the great hall, Neville following on close behind. They had barely sat down when Lavender passed them over the offending article. The title alone was

enough to make Harry livid but he understood that was exactly Rita's intentions and he was not about to give her that satisfaction.

Harry Potter's Heartache

Deprived of love since his parents deaths, Harry Potter thought he'd found solace in the arms of his steady girlfriend, Muggle Born Hermione Granger. Little did he know that the plain but ambitious Miss Granger appears to have developed a taste for famous wizards. The Bulgarian International Seeker, and fellow Tri-Wizard champion, Victor Krum also found himself placed under this wicked witch's spell. She had led this poor foreigner on to the point where he asked her to the Yule Ball, to be healed at Hogwarts as part of the tournament, only to find himself publicly rejected.

However it might not be the somewhat doubtful natural charm Miss Granger possesses that sees her attracting all this famous male attention.

"She's really ugly," says Miss Parkinson, a pretty and vivacious forth year student. "She's quite brainy though, well capable of making a love potion. I think that's how she's doing it."

Love potions are of course illegal and we can only hope Albus Dumbledore will take swift action to see justice done. It is also our hope here at Witch Weekly that next time Mr Potter will entrust his heart to a worthier cause.

Hermione was putting on a brave face as she ate her breakfast but Harry could see the hurt behind the facade. He really wanted to hit something, preferably with a hammer.

The nasal whine coming from behind him gave Harry his target, he was just going to use a different type of hammer to pound the ponce.

"Being cheated on by a mudblood, could you get any lower Potter?"

"Ah Malfoy, being the intelligent pureblood that you are, surely you don't believe everything Rita Skeeter writes? I mean, 'Miss Parkinson, a pretty and vivacious forth year student' Are we really expected to believe that? Next Rita will be claiming Crabb and Goyle are two of the brightest students in the school."

This had the Gryffindor's laughing and the sniggers were spreading throughout the hall. "Why don't you take your little posse back over to your own table and spend your time trying to come up with something better than 'Potter Stinks'. That's so poor I'm actually insulted more by your lack of effort."

Draco was standing there, along with Crabb, Goyle and Pansy, and he hadn't a clue what to do next. Harry though could see Hermione smiling and had no intention of stopping.

"If I was making badges I would have come up with something like 'Draco Dribbles' or 'Malfoy's a Moron' perhaps even 'Junior Deatheater', then you could really follow in your father's footsteps."

"You leave my father out of this Potter." Draco was shouting with anger.

"See Malfoy, you just proved my point. Much more effective and you actually are dribbling. You want to wipe that right away, hellish to get off your robes when it dries."

Draco was desperate to go for his wand as the hall was openly laughing at him now. He was left to scurry back to his own table with as much dignity as he could muster, which wasn't much.

Hermione had cheered up considerably until the owls started arriving. The first couple held notes from obviously deranged people, threatening terrible retribution toward Hermione. It was the one that squished liquid all over her hands though that changed the entire morning, this had just gotten a lot more serious. Harry was trying to wipe the fluid off without getting any on himself as Hermione's hands had painfully ballooned to a state where she couldn't use them.

"You're going to have to see Madam Pomfrey about this..."

Harry was cut off by the Weasley owl crashing into the table, a red envelope in its beak. Mrs Weasley's voice soon reverberated around the hall.

"Hermione Granger, how could you behave like that with Harry gurgles..."

This proved to be the last straw for Hermione as she ran out the hall toward the infirmary. Harry though had grabbed the serving bowl of porridge and slammed it down on top of the offending howler. Not even Molly Weasley's voice could overcome being drowned in Hogwarts oatmeal.

The silence was broken only by the twins.

"Bloody Brilliant!"

"Why didn't we ever think of that?"

Harry watched Hermione leave before rising and approaching the head table. "Hermione has just been injured while eating her breakfast, can I ask what you are going to do about it?"

Dumbledore gave Harry his grade one reassuring grandfather look before answering. "What would you have us do Mr Potter?"

Harry turned to face the Slytherin table. "See Malfoy, told you Rita writes nothing but lies. 'We can only hope Albus Dumbledore will take swift action to see justice done', fat chance!"

Harry started walking out the hall until McGonagall called to him. "Mr Potter, where are you going?"

"To the infirmary professor."

"Madam Pomfrey is perfectly capable of attending to Miss Granger without your assistance."

"I am more than aware of Madam Pomfrey's capabilities, having been on the receiving end of them a few times. I hope to use them again today. Some very serious claims have been made here this morning and, while it seems the Hogwarts staff don't care about them, I certainly do. Once it's confirmed there are no love potions in my bloodstream, the whole school will know that Pansy Parkinson is not just an ugly witch but a lying one too."

"Detention with me tonight Potter."

Harry looked from Snape toward his own head of house. "Parkinson tells the country that Hermione is ugly and using love potions yet goes unpunished?"

Snape's sneer was on full blast now. "You said it yourself Potter, no one can believe a word Skeeter says."

"I really don't care, I'm just glad our international guests get to see just how big a shithole Hogwarts really is."

By the time the staff had noticed the shocked expressions of the French and Bulgarian students present, Harry was out the door and on his way to the infirmary.

-oOoOo-

Hermione was getting her inflamed hands wrapped in bandages, which at least helped mask the awful smell of the ointment underneath them. She was surprised when Harry entered the infirmary.

"What are you doing here? You better move before you get another detention."

"Too late, I'm afraid I'll have to stand you up tonight as I got a better offer. Who could resist spending an evening with Professor Snape?"

"What did you do this time?"

"Same as last time, I now get detentions for telling the truth."

"Harry, what did you say?"

"I called Parkinson an ugly lying witch, which Madam Pomfrey here is going to help me prove."

"Mr Potter, I have no intention of being drawn into whatever scheme you happen to be running at the moment."

Harry became deadly serious. "Hermione has been publicly accused of using love potions to toy with my affections, I would like to be tested and prove that is not the case."

Poppy immediately went into professional mode, "Is this true Miss Granger?"

Hermione could only nod, the hurt clearly visible now.

"That's why she got that stuff all over her hands, some nutter sent it to her by owl because of what Skeeter wrote."

The Hogwarts healer's attitude changed. "What do you need from me Mr Potter?"

"I would like to be tested and then for you to give me written proof I'm not under the influence of a love potion. I have no intention of letting this matter drop."

"I also would like same."

None of the three had heard Victor enter the infirmary, he held his hands up as Harry started reaching for his wand. "I have come to apologise, and help if I can. I was told Herminny didn't have boyfriend, clearly that was wrong. I'm very sorry to be the cause of her being hurt and will help any way I can."

It was Hermione who answered for them. "Thank you Mr Krum, a letter from Madam Pomfrey stating neither of you are under the influence of potions should shut a lot of people up."

"Please call me Victor, I hope we can be friends?"

"I should have handled the situation better, you just caught me at a bad moment Victor."

Harry held out his hand. "Thanks for doing this Victor, we both appreciate it."

McGonagall walked in to see Harry Potter and Victor Krum shaking hands while a smiling Hermione Granger looked on, could this day get any stranger. "Mr Potter, you are to accompany me to the headmaster's office..."

"Mr Potter is going nowhere until I give him a clean bill of health."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Both of these young men are suspected of being under the influence of potions."

"Miss Granger would never do such a thing."

"Thank you for standing up in the Great Hall and saying that Professor."

The sarcasm from the normally rule abiding Miss Granger shocked Minerva almost as much as the girl's answer to her next question. "How are you feeling?"

"Disappointed and disillusioned."

Minerva was left standing there while Poppy completed her ministrations on Miss Granger and then tested the two young men for any trace of potions. When Poppy then started writing results down, the Hogwarts deputy was ready to explode. Only after Poppy had sealed a scroll and handed it to Harry was she finally able to get him out of there. Victor accompanied them until his destination took him in another direction.

-oOoOo-

When Harry reached Dumbledore's office, he decided to set the tone before they even started. "Can I ask why Professor Snape is present? He is neither my head of house nor deputy headmaster."

"Why you arrogant..."

"Now Severus, that is a fair question. Professor Snape is here Harry because I trust his judgment." The finality in Dumbledore's voice left no one in any doubt this matter was now closed.

Harry just ignored that fact. "So can I get someone in here I trust?" The silence that followed that remark could probably only be matched if Harry had pissed all over the floor.

"Are you implying Harry that you don't trust any of us?"

"Oh sorry sir, I didn't mean to imply, I'll say it out loud. I don't trust any of you."

"May I enquire how you reached that conclusion Harry?"

"Sticking to this year, I'm in this tournament and none of you prevented it. My best friend is in the infirmary and none of you prevented it. Malfoy called her a mudblood and nothing was done about it. The only one punished was me."

"I think we could be looking at increasing the number of detentions Potter."

Harry just shrugged his indifference. "I've been scrubbing floors since I was four, doesn't really bother me any more."

Dumbledore reasserted his control over the situation. "You were asked here to explain that comment you made before leaving the hall this morning. One of Hogwarts most prominent students publicly decrying the school is not the image we are trying to project to our visitors."

"A student gets verbally abused and chemically attacked while at breakfast yet everyone is more concerned about what Harry Potter says? Perhaps I should do what Professor Snape accuses me of and start using my fame. There must be more reporters out there than Rita Skeeter who would like to talk to me?"

Harry's change of attitude was totally bamboozling Albus, his lack of trust could be disastrous. He felt forced to take an action he really didn't want to. "Harry, your actions and attitude today leave me no other option but to confine you to the castle over Christmas. Should you have written permission to leave from your guardians, I will of course honour it."

His insides were turning to mush but Harry tried not to let that show. "You may force me to stay in the castle but I still refuse to have anything to do with this ball."

"You will do what you're told Potter."

"And how do you intend to force me? I can throw off the Imperius from Professor Moody and have a scroll in my hand from Madam Pomfrey saying that I'm currently free from potions."

Minerva felt as if she needed to sit after hearing that but had to ask the question that was at the forefront of her mind. "Do you really think we would do something like that to you Mr Potter?"

"Well, you made me face a dragon in front of the entire school, I don't see how using those means to get me to the ball would be any worse? We can't have Hogwarts looking bad now, can we?"

Harry used the stunned silence that followed to take his leave. He was making his way down the spiral staircase and thinking how much better he felt since taking the decision to leave Hogwarts. It was so liberating to know he was finished dealing with Dumbledore, death eaters and Dementors. Losing his magic could also see these terrible dreams go, Harry was now continually just looking toward the positive. Providing he could remember Hermione, losing his magic would be just one more thing for him to cope with. He'd had plenty experience with coping already in his short life.

It took a few moments for the adults to recover from Harry's comments, it was his head of house who asked the question. "Do you think it's wise to keep him here over Christmas Albus? I get the feeling things are only going to get worse."

"I tend to agree with you Minerva, in that the situation will deteriorate. My problem is that, should Harry go home for the holidays, I get the distinct impression he wouldn't return to Hogwarts."

"Where would he go? He knows he needs to compete in the next task or he will lose his magic."

"Precisely Minerva."

When what Albus was implying sank in, Minerva McGonagall had to be led to a seat. There were tears in her eyes, tears for the son of her friends. "We've pushed him so far that he's considering losing his magic to get away from us?"

By way of an answer, Albus opened a drawer in his desk and removed a bottle of fine whiskey, along with three glasses. "I have no idea how to deal with this Minerva. Harry obviously thinks he would be better off as a muggle and seems prepared to sacrifice his magic to do so. In all my years I've never encountered that, what do we do here?"

Severus picked up his whisky and took a sip before offering his opinion. "We need something to keep him here, voluntarily of course. What about his friends?"

"Mr Weasley has been a bit of an arse this year, that really only leaves Miss Granger."

"A young lady who will be just as comfortable in the muggle world. You said she intended to go home for the holidays? It will be interesting to see if she changes that decision, now Harry will be staying in the castle."

"Albus, forcing Harry to stay here on his own could really harden his attitude toward Hogwarts and us. Wouldn't it be better to let him leave and perhaps cool down?"

"That was my original intention but I think the situation is worse than I first thought. I am open to suggestions here?"

"Like I said, he needs a reason to stay. Potter needs a girlfriend and the castle is going to be full of eligible females for the ball."

"Severus, if I even suspect a potion has been used on Mr Potter, I'll call Amelia Bones to Hogwarts myself. The young man has clearly got his eye on a certain young witch, I will not stand to see any interference in that."

Albus intervened before the two professors could get into a row over this. "I hope your scruples don't lead to Voldemort ruling Britain Minerva, that young man is the only thing that has stood between that possibility becoming a reality since he was a year old. Harry Potter losing his magic could doom us all."

Both Minerva and Severus drained their glasses and passed them to Albus for refills, they had just eaten breakfast too.

-oOoOo-

Harry headed for the infirmary to give Hermione the bad news, just in time to help her with her book bag. Since Hermione could hold neither wand nor quill, and Harry already had a detention, the pair headed back to Gryffindor tower.

Hermione was sitting on the large sofa beside her best friend and was now glad she had decided to tell him today. She also hadn't missed that Harry hadn't corrected Victor when the Bulgarian implied they were a couple, perhaps things would work out the way she hoped.

"What if I were to say that I already had written permission for you to leave Hogwarts for Christmas?"

It was like watching Harry being hit with a cheering charm. "I would say that the best friend in the entire world had outdone herself."

"What if I was to also say that this permission allowed you to spend the entire holidays with the Granger family?"

"I would say that the same best friend was in for one hell of a Christmas present."

Hermione was trying not to blush, waking up with Harry in her house would be all the Christmas present she needed. Now she had to do the hard bit. "What if I told you that I had discovered a way the ministry couldn't touch your memories when you lose your magic?"

"I think I would fall at your feet and kiss them."

"That's a start." She muttered.

"What?"

"Oh, where would you like me to start?"

"As much as I'm looking forward to staying with you over the holidays, I'd rather find out how I'll remember you come Easter first."

Hermione was hoping she could lead up to this but now had to jump right in. "The only reason the ministry could obliviate you is your lack of magical family. Had you a parent, sibling or even a free Sirius, we wouldn't even need to talk about this."

Harry was nodding his understanding so she continued. "What you have to do is create a link to a magical person, then the ministry will be scuppered."

"Hermione, are you talking about adoption or something like that?"

"No, that would work but not in the time frame we're dealing with here. It would also raise a whole load of questions you don't really want to answer. The only option I can see working is a betrothal. Providing the witch still agrees she wants the betrothal when your magic is gone, the ministry are screwed."

To say Harry was shocked at this was a massive understatement. Hermione though was misreading his silence and starting to panic. It had taken all this time to get Harry interested in her and now she'd gone and blown it. The young witch began to babble. "This isn't as bad as it sounds Harry, you have lots of options open to you. Loads of witches would like to be betrothed to the boy-who-lived..."

Hermione was stopped from saying any more by Harry's finger gently but firmly being placed on her lips. "The boy-who-lived isn't looking to become betrothed, Harry Potter might be though. I'm hoping a certain Gryffindor might eventually be interested in the position, I'm also hoping that's why she arranged for me to be spending the holidays with her parents. I might be clueless but I think we should at least give being a couple a try first. Hermione, would you be my girlfriend?"

The finger was removed and Hermione gave her answers. "Yes, yes and hell yes!"

Harry then replaced his finger with his lips as they both enjoyed their first kiss. He still had his arm around her as Harry asked his new girlfriend just what was involved in becoming betrothed.

Hermione was snuggling into Harry as she answered. "Because of our ages, my parents need to give written permission. So does your guardian."

"Shit, I can't see the Dursleys going for that."

"The school accepted your Hogsmead form signed by Sirius, the betrothal paperwork should do the same."

"I suppose I need to write to him anyway. I might need to sneak out of Hogwarts to meet him, there is no way I can put what I need to

say in a letter. Probably better to hear what your parents say first. If they kick me out for becoming your boyfriend then I won't need to mention betrothal to Sirius."

"My mum knows I've been hoping you would ask me to be your girlfriend, she'll love you."

"I notice you didn't mention your father there? How did they get the Dursleys to agree anyway? I can't believe they would agree to something I wanted?"

Harry could feel the heat coming from Hermione as she burrows into him more and wouldn't meet his gaze. "My dad might get a bit 'protective father' on you but mum and I will be working on him. Once he gets to know you, he'll love you as much as I do."

"You didn't tell me how they got the Dursleys to agree for me to spend Christmas with you?"

"Let's just say my dad can be very persuasive when he wants to be."

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Vernon answered the door and was immediately impressed with the couple who were waiting on him there. This wasn't any door to door sales nor pedlers of religion, their clothes, manarisms and Range Rover parked at the kirb ticked all his 'right kind of people' boxes. When the six foot plus gentlemen spoke, the respect in his voice sealed the deal.

"Excuse me, would you be Vernon Dursley?"

When Vernon nodded, the gentleman continued. "I wonder if my wife and I could take a few minutes of your time to discuss a rather delicate matter?"

Vernon was now intrigued and invited the couple into their home where introductions were made. "Sorry for disturbing you and your good wife but this couldn't wait. I am Daniel Granger and this is my wife Emma. We're here concerning your nephew."

"What's the little shit done now? Are you..."

"Dentists, yes. We have our own practice in Crawley. Is this your nephew here?"

Dan was indicating one of the many pictures of a large boy displayed on every available surface, Petunia nearly had a fit. "Indeed it is not. That is our son, Dudley. What has the boy been up to?"

Dan's whole demeanor screamed his anger. "Apparantly, our little girl is sweet on him. As you can probably guess, I'm not to happy about that."

Vernon had known these were his kind of people and not wanting to have anything to do with the freak just confirmed his opinion. They appeared not to know anything about the M word so he wouldn't mention it again. "I can't say I blame you. My advice would be to get your girl away from him as soon as possible."

"Yes but we all know what teenagers are like. If we lay down the law like that, it will only push them together as they rebel against the wicked parents who know nothing. We need to be a little bit clever than that."

Both Dursleys liked what they were hearing here. Petunia asked the question that they wanted to know the answer to. "What did you have in mind?"

Emma now played her part. "Hermione has asked if this boy can spend the holidays with us but we need your written permission to allow that."

Dan continued before the Dursleys could ask any awkward questions. "We intend to keep him under our eyes and mercilessly expose any and every fault we can find. By the second week I'm willing to bet they won't even shake hands, far less kiss to wish each other a Happy New Year."

The thought of the freak having a miserable Christmas and helping these good people saw the stationary coming out. Dan and Emma left Privet Drive with the note they came for and promises to keep in touch to let the Dursleys know what happened.

Vernon and Petunia felt they may have made some friends while the Grangers laughed most of the way back to Crawley.

-oOoOo-

Harry had went to his next class, mainly because there were some things he wanted to ask Neville. He then took care of some business before rushing back to Gryffindor tower to be with his new girlfriend. They were currently sitting on one of the sofas with a book between them, Harry of course was having to turn the pages.

It was time to go down to dinner and Harry took Hermione by the arm, the slightest bump to her badly swollen hands was very painful. Harry sat her down at the Gryffindor table before boldly going where no Gryffindor had gone before, across the hall to the Slytherin table.

The hall was silent as everyone waited to see what Harry Potter was up to now.

"Miss Parkinson, it has been confirmed that neither Victor nor myself are under the influence of any love potions. I intend to send a complaint to Madam Bones, who I'm told is the head of the Magical Law department. I am offering you the chance to apologise to Hermione in front of the school and then it would only be Skeeter my complaint would be against."

Pansy wanted the ground to open up and swallow her. Granger complaining against a pureblood would be confined to the nearest bin in the ministry, the boy-who-lived was an entirely different matter. She was also enough of a Slytherin to know Skeeter would push all the blame on to her. The bitch had practically put the words in her mouth but Pansy had thought at the time it was a great laugh. There really was only one thing she could do, no matter how painful it was.

Draco tried to pull her arm to stop her from standing but this had to be done. "Miss Granger, I apologise for any slight on your character. I'm also really sorry about your hands."

As Pansy sat, she received an unexpected surprise.

"Thank you Miss Parkinson, I would like to offer an apology of my own. I was totally out of order this morning with what I said to you and deserved the detention I received."

This saw Pansy actually smile and nod in acceptance of the apology.

Harry returned to his own table, sitting next to Hermione and beginning to fill a plate for her. He received a kiss from his girlfriend who then answered his unasked question. "Just for being you."

The entire hall was now aware that the two Gryffindors had become a couple, especially as Harry was having to feed her. That was interrupted by the unusual arrival of an owl, an owl carrying a smoking red envelope. Hermione almost shrivled into her seat as the envelope exploded into action and Molly Weasley's voice once more rang out around the hall. It took Hermione a moment to realise that the howler was not directed at her.

George was reaching for the bowl of mashed potato to smother the thing until he heard the start of his mother's rant, it froze the entire hall.

"Harry Potter, how dare you send me a howler. I was only looking out for your welfare and that was the thanks I got? Well, let me tell you something you are no longer welcome in this house anymore. I thought you were a respectful young man, I now know that was wrong. Don't be expecting a Christmas jumper from me ever again."

Harry ignored the entire incident, placing a daintily cut piece of chicken into Hermione's now wide open mouth. He had to use his finger to close it and verbally remind her to chew.

Fred broke the ice. "You sent our mum a howler?"

"Brass ones Fred, big brass ones. Harry, that impressed me more than what you did to that dragon."

"Thanks for understanding guys, no one gets away with saying that to my girlfriend. I had already made up my mind I wouldn't be going back to the Burrow unless your mother apologised to Hermione."

Harry saw everyone at the table now looking behind him, he didn't have to turn around as he instantly recognised the voice.

"Potter, your disgusting displays of affection have put me off my dinner. This means your detention can start early, move."

"No."

There was a pause while everyone in the hall, including Snape, made sure they had heard that answer correctly. "What did you say boy?"

"I said no sir. At the moment, Hermione is unable to defend herself. I shall be walking her back to Gryffindor tower and then join you for my detention."

"You will do exactly as I say Potter or I will see you expelled."

Harry shrugged his shoulders and refused to move.

Snape was distracted from continuing his rant by a voice directly behind him. For such a powerful figure, Victor Krum was very light on his feet.

"Perhaps I could be of some assistance? If Harry would allow, I would be happy to provide an escort for Hermione back to her house."

Harry kissed Hermione on the cheek, just to annoy Snape some more, before shaking Victor's hand and then following the billowing one out the hall.

Victor took Hermione's arm and helped her to stand, the pair found themselves with quite the escort of Gryffindor's back to their tower.

Albus had sat and watched tonight's interplay with dismay, it was almost as if Harry was severing ties with the people the headmaster held any sway over. That the lad was no longer welcome at the Burrow was a shock to the system. He knew Molly well enough to know she would never admit she was in the wrong, far less apologise to the Granger girl.

One thing did fall in his favour though, Harry had made a big impression on quite a few young ladies tonight. Miss Weasley was probably no longer an option after what happened with her mother but Albus was literally spoilt for choice in who to set young Harry up with. That Miss Granger appeared to still be going home for Christmas simplified matters greatly. By the time she returned in the

New Year, Harry would be well and truly entangled with whatever girl Albus selected for the task.

He hated to do this but the lad was forcing his hand. No one could miss that Severus' treat of expulsion had no effect on him whatsoever and Harry Potter leaving Hogwarts was just unthinkable. Harry Potter losing his magic was an outcome that had to be prevented at all costs. The fate of the British magical community depended on it. What was a teenager's love life compared to that?

A/N Thanks for reading

Chapter 3

It wasn't really true to say Harry had woken early, he hadn't really slept last night. The last couple of days could be considered the calm before the storm, and Harry didn't need a BBC weather man to tell him the storm would hit today. With Hermione's hands now healed and his detention served, they had managed to keep a fairly low profile for the remaining few days of term. Well, low profile for them.

That they were a couple was now known by everyone in the castle, it also appeared to be common knowledge that Hermione was going home for Christmas while her new boyfriend wasn't. Harry had definitely noticed the girls circling him in the last few days. It was as if they were a pack of wolves, waiting to pounce on the unprotected lamb when the shepherd wasn't watching. There were going to be a lot of upset and disappointed people when Harry got on that train this morning.

They had been given a reprieve from the Weasley situation, thanks mainly to Neville. The shy lad asking Ginny to the ball had certainly focused Ron's anger at a different target. Neville appeared ready to stand up for himself but Ginny had placed her petite body like a shield between her ball date and her brother. The house got to see just how the Weasley family operated with the resulting stramash requiring McGonagall to enter the Gryffindor common room to split them up. Their head of house appeared surprised that Harry and Hermione were sitting in a corner and playing no part in the altercation. McGonagall would certainly have all the altercation she could handle today.

They had deliberately not mentioned having written permission to go home and hoped to get out the castle without anyone being any the wiser. Neither of them thought there was a snowball's chance in hell of that happening. Harry had slept in tee and boxers, allowing him to pack his trunk last night. His travelling clothes were laid out as he headed for the shower.

Ron woke to Harry putting on his cloak and levitating his trunk toward the door. "You really are leaving for Christmas?"

"Yeah, just need to get away from the madness for a while. I left you a present on my bed. My dress robes may be a bit tight on you but

they should be better than the frilly things you've got stashed in the bottom of your trunk. Have a Merry Christmas and I'll see you when we get back."

Ron lay there and wondered about the boy who was Harry Potter. On some level Ron understood he'd been a jealous git this year, to both Harry and Hermione, yet here was Harry saving him the embarrassment of having to wear the abominations that his mother had sent him to Hogwarts with. That his parents managed to find enough money for Ginny to have a new dress just rubbed salt into Ron's poverty wound. Now that he had the proper robes he just needed the right girl on his arm. He shuddered at the thought of Eloise Midgen perhaps being the only available girl left to ask. With Harry now leaving, the girls who had been holding out hoping he would then ask them now needed a date. Ron Weasley might just get lucky.

Hermione was of course waiting on Harry at the bottom of the stairs, a kiss in greeting and they were ready to go. Everything that needed to be said had been covered over the last couple of days. Taking a few deep breaths, they were ready to face the music.

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The couple thought they just might have gotten a break when spotting that it was Professor Flitwick in charge of those leaving the castle, they should have known they couldn't be that lucky.

"Mr Potter, your name is not on the list of those going home for the holidays."

"Well sir, this is certainly something I put my name down for. Half my house saw me doing it."

"I understand the headmaster had a talk with you and managed to change your mind?"

Harry fought to keep his temper at the lying old bastard's antics. "No sir, he certainly did not change my mind. He barred me from leaving unless I had a signed note from my guardians. As you can see, I have such a note."

The little charms professor cast a spell at the note which then glowed green for a few seconds, confirming its authenticity. "Why did the headmaster try to stop you from going home for the holidays?"

"Sir, who knows why the headmaster does anything, he certainly didn't give me any reason."

Both could see the confusion on the likeable little professor's face. "What did Professor McGonagall have to say about that?"

"Have you ever known Professor McGonagall to go against what the headmaster wants sir? One of the disadvantages of being sorted into Gryffindor, and you're stuck there for seven years."

As far as Filius could see, Albus had no right to stop the lad going home to spend Christmas with his family. Especially since Mr Potter had their express written permission. More importantly though, Filius had no right to stop the boy boarding the carriage for home. He took a careful note that Mr Potter had now left the castle and waved them on.

Harry and Hermione waited until the express was actually pulling out of Hogsmead before relaxing, he actually pulled Hermione into a celebratory kiss. "You are just the most wonderful person it has ever been my pleasure to meet, thank you."

"Don't thank me yet, we've still to eat breakfast." Hermione produced bacon sandwiches, wrapped in napkins, that she'd grabbed that morning from the great hall. "I know we decided to stay away from breakfast this morning but everyone knew I was leaving anyway. This should keep us going until the trolley lady arrives."

Harry had no words left to show his gratitude, he just kissed his girlfriend again before they both tucked in to a belated breakfast. Due to the ball, the number of students on the train from fourth year or over could be counted in single digits. As none of the younger students had the nerve to approach Harry Potter or Hermione Granger, the couple spent a peaceful train ride down to London.

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Peaceful was not a word that could be used to describe the staff table that morning, the great Albus Dumbledore was in an absolute rage. With it being a Saturday, and the first day of the holidays, most people had chosen to leave it as late as possible before coming down to breakfast. The hall was pretty full when the headmaster began shouting at the Head of Ravenclaw house.

"Why did you let him leave the castle? His name was most definitely not on the list of those going home?"

The diminutive charms master was giving as good as he got though. "Mr Potter claimed that he put his name on the list and certainly never changed his mind about wanting to leave the castle for the holidays."

Albus was about to jump back in when Filius stomped all over any argument. "The lad also told me you barred him from going home, unless he had a signed note from his guardians." He let that piece of news filter through the hall before delivering the coup de grace.

"Mr Potter had such a note. The student clearly wanted to go home for the holidays and had express written permission allowing him to so. The Hogwarts charter is very clear on this matter headmaster, there were no grounds for denying Mr Potter his wishes."

"You should have sent for me..."

Filius was having none of it. "I have been a professor at Hogwarts for over two decades, I think I know how to handle something as simple as a student going home for the holidays. That is unless there is some different criteria that applies to Mr Potter?"

"As Mr Potter is not a member of your house, you should have contacted Minerva or myself to sort out any discrepancies."

"The only discrepancy I could see was Mr Potter doing what he was entitled to do, rather than what you had planned for him." Filius then directed his ire at Minerva. "This is your student he's trying to control, are you just going to sit there and let Mr Potter's rights be ignored again? Is it any wonder why both he and Miss Granger regret being sorted into Gryffindor when their Head of House just sits back and

let's these two do whatever they want to the children in your supposed care?"

With Minerva and Severus now drawn into the argument, Pomona erected silencing wards.

This was a certain student's cue to head for the owlery. It had been spread all over the castle that Harry Potter would be in Hogwarts over Christmas and was looking forward to the ball. Susan Bones couldn't help but think there were some very big lies being told here. The fact that Harry was on the train out of Scotland pointed the finger a lot nearer to home. Her Aunt Amelia had asked her some pertinent questions in her latest letter, leading Susan to believe Harry had carried out his threat to contact the DMLE. She was certain auntie would want to hear about this latest fiasco.

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The young couple had their trunks loaded onto a trolley with their familiars in their respective cages perched on top of them. Harry was trying to psych himself up for the meeting that was about to take place. Facing his girlfriend's parents was always going to be daunting without Hermione's betrothal idea being flung in there as well.

All thoughts of the senior Grangers flew out the window when they spied who was marching down the platform toward them, Albus Dumbledore.

"Mr Potter, I thought I made my feelings on you leaving the castle quite plain?"

"Yes sir you did, and I did exactly what you said I needed to. I have written permission from my aunt and uncle to leave Hogwarts for Christmas."

"You should have brought that permission to me, and we could have discussed it."

"I wasn't told I needed to bring my permission to you and there was nothing to discuss. I wanted to leave the castle and have permission from my guardians to do so. You said you would honour that, or is

this another one of those cases where you say one thing and do something else?"

"Mr Potter, this continuing bad attitude is the reason you were being confined to the castle. Since your attitude hasn't changed..."

"This isn't Hogwarts Albus, just what are you trying to pull here?"

Albus spun around to see Amelia Bones standing there. "I might ask you the same question Amelia. Since Susan is staying in Hogwarts, I have to wonder what you are doing here?"

"Simple Albus, Mr Potter wrote to me looking for justice. Apparently he can't find any at Hogwarts, I'm beginning to see his point from your actions here." She then addressed herself to the two teens. "Mr Potter, I am Madam Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Could you tell me what the problem appears to be here?"

Albus attempted to interrupt but all three ignored him. There were also parents and students on the platform who were now watching the confrontation with great interest.

"The headmaster barred me from leaving Hogwarts unless I had written permission from my guardians. I have that permission and now he's about to change the rules again."

"Can I see this note Mr Potter?" Harry handed it over and again it glowed green when the authenticity spell was cast on it.

"This all looks above board to me Albus, what is your problem here?"

"I can't believe his relatives would actually give him permission..."

Harry jumped right in. "Which is why he set that condition in the first place."

Hermione holding his arm was the only thing stopping him completely losing his temper, Harry was really sick of one Albus Dumbledore.

His girlfriend tried to help him out. "Madam Bones, my parents actually visited Harry's relatives and got their permission. They're waiting for us outside the barrier and will confirm the note is genuine."

Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling as he offered a suggestion. "Would you care to go and collect them Miss Granger?"

Hermione screamed 'no' at Dumbledore while holding tighter onto Harry's arm. Amelia was surprised at this reaction and asked the clearly upset girl for an explanation.

"If I go through that barrier, the chances of Harry still being here when I come back with my parents are nil. He would whisk Harry off to Hogwarts in a second, the headmaster just does what he wants and gets away with it."

Amelia didn't try too hard to hide her smile. "It would seem you inspire trust in your students Albus. Tonks, Miss Granger if you could describe your parents to my auror, she'll go and fetch them for us."

Hermione quickly filled the young auror in on what she would be looking for. "My dad is six foot two, well built, short dark hair and wears gold framed glasses. My mum looks quite like an older version of me."

The pink haired auror soon returned with the Granger parents in tow.

Emma raced over to embrace Hermione, it was her only choice as her daughter still refused to release her grip on Harry's arm. Dan of course noticed this but had more important things to deal with at the moment.

"Can I ask why the law is interested in my daughter?"

Amelia identified herself before offering an explanation. "Mr Granger, I was contacted over some allegations printed about your daughter in a magazine."

Both parents were now looking at their daughter for confirmation that this was true, they were amazed at the reason given.

"A boy asked me to the ball, I said no. Next thing I know there's an article in a magazine saying I'm using love potions to get boys interested in me."

Amelia filled in the blanks for the confused muggle parents. "What your daughter is omitting is that the boy in question is a famous sportsman. When you combine that fact with her boyfriend being probably the most famous wizard in the country, I think jealousy reared its ugly head amongst her peers."

Hermione attempted to divert her dad from the 'boyfriend' comment, she wasn't sure if her mum had broke that news to him yet. "Dad, the headmaster here is doubting the permission you got from the Dursleys."

Dan's attention was now focused on the headmaster, in all honesty it was hard not to with those ridiculous robes. Deep purple with silver stars and moons that actually moved, drag queens would probably fight over them. "My wife and I were there when both Vernon and Petunia Dursley signed their permission, I hope you are not calling our honesty into question? I can easily call them on my cell phone and they can confirm this for you, I really don't see what the problem is here headmaster?"

The emphasis Dan put on the word headmaster was deliberate, he wanted to know what business the headmaster of a school had following the kids five hundred miles because one of them wanted to go home for Christmas.

"I was unaware Harry would not be staying with his relatives, I can't allow that. It is much too dangerous so he will have to return to Hogwarts with me."

That was it for Harry, his temper snapped and his voice was loud.

"Too dangerous? I'll bet I don't get attacked by trolls, basilisks, Dementors or Voldemort at the Grangers. I've almost been killed so many times in that nuthouse you call a school that I've lost count, and what have you done about it? Handed out some house points! Madam Bones, can he legally stop me from spending Christmas with Hermione?"

"No Mr Potter he can't, he doesn't have the authority."

"That's never bothered him before madam, I'm not supposed to be in this tournament either but the headmaster said I must take part. The rules don't seem to matter when my name is concerned."

Amelia could see Harry's point, she wouldn't put it past Albus to turn up at the Grangers and take him back to Hogwarts. The old man hated not to get his own way. "Mr and Mrs Granger, the headmaster has a valid point. Would you have room for one of my aurors to stay with you to provide security for the holidays?"

By the smirk on the monocle wearing woman's face, and the look of fury now on the headmaster's, both Granger parents cottoned on to what Madam Bones was really offering. Protection from the old man.

"That would be fine, did you have anyone in mind?"

"Auror Tonks here is well versed in both worlds and has the unique ability to blend in wherever she goes. Mr Potter, I think we should hold our other talk later, there's been enough of a free show here today. Tonks, your assignment until the holidays are over is to protect Mr Potter. The usual rules apply."

Dan just had to ask. "What are the usual rules Madam Bones?"

"Oh an auror on protection detail has to hold anything they hear or see in confidence. She can't run telling tales to me or anyone else."

Both Granger girls recognised the smirk on Dan's face, someone was going to be in trouble. "Just how far do these protection duties go? I mean will they stop his girlfriend's father from having a 'chat' with him?"

"Mr Granger, my Susan is the same age as these two. I can assure you it would take more than an auror guard to stop me having a few words with any boyfriend."

Dan's rendition of 'excellent' reminded both his girls of his favorite cartoon show.

Dumbledore left in a strop and Amelia made arrangements to stop by later that evening, this would also allow Tonks to go home and pack some stuff. The five easily slotted into the Granger Range

Rover after loading the luggage and animals, it was then Hermione had to put phase one of their operation into play. Both she and Harry had relaxed after hearing about the confidentiality clause, some of the things Tonks was going to hear could turn her pink hair white.

"Dad, could we stop by Diagon Alley? Harry needs to get some business done at Gringotts."

"Sure petal, does your boyfriend need to take some money out to buy his girlfriend a Christmas present?"

His emphasis on boyfriend and girlfriend saw Emma take action. "Dan Granger, you will behave yourself. These two have only been together a few days and I'm sure Harry knows he doesn't have to buy Hermione's affection."

For some reason this started Tonks off laughing. Discovering the rest of the car's occupants were now staring at her saw the young auror explain. "Sorry everyone but I just watched Harry Potter stand toe to toe with the most powerful wizard in the country without blinking. His girlfriend's father though has him flinching in the backseat of the car."

The stares continued until the auror was heard to mutter. "Well, I thought it was funny."

Harry had to admit he liked having an auror guard, they were straight through the Leaky Cauldron and made it inside Gringotts without anyone bothering them. Now for the hard part.

Harry approached the nearest available teller for assistance. "Excuse me, my name is Harry Potter and I need to access my vault."

"Key?"

"I don't have it."

"What?"

"I don't have it, actually I've never had it. Molly Weasley usually does my Hogwarts shopping for me."

"No one but the owner of the vault should ever be in possession of the key. We will have to verify who you are and forge a new key, the cost of which will be met by you. Follow me."

Harry looked toward the people with him and the goblin answered his non verbal question. "They may accompany you, if you trust them?"

Harry held out his hand for Hermione and the other three just followed on.

They were led along some winding corridors until they reached a large stone door. The goblin ran his finger down it to allow them entrance into what could loosely be described as an office. It actually was more cave-like than anything else and was probably hewn out of the solid rock that made up its walls, floor and ceiling. The desk that the room held was also made of stone, stone polished to such a degree that it reflected the light coming off the flaming torches attached to the wall.

Both Granger parents could imagine this as some movie horror set, especially the creature behind the desk. The goblin that had led them here spoke in their own language to the creature who was obviously his superior before retreating and standing guard at the door.

The goblin then looked at Harry like something on his dinner plate he didn't like. "It was very foolish of you Mr Potter to let someone else have access to your vault, I need a sample of your blood to issue a new key and tie your vault to you." A wicked looking dagger was then placed on the table, next to a small stone bowl. "A cut on your finger should be sufficient, we only need a few drops."

After Harry cut his thumb and held it over the bowl, a red mist started to appear as the droplets fell. In moments, the mist had dispersed and there was a new golden key at the bottom of the bowl.

"Great, now how do I get all my gold out of there and transferred into muggle money? I need to close my account."

This certainly got the goblin's attention. "May I be allowed to ask why you are closing your Gringotts account? You do realise that you can only close your trust account at the moment?"

"My trust account? I thought I only had one account?"

"There is your parents' vault, which you will be able to access when you are seventeen. There is also the Potter family vault which you won't have access to until you're twenty-three, you also then become Lord Potter."

Harry and Hermione shared a glance, this was something they hadn't factored into their plan. "Can you give me some idea of the amount of money we are talking about here?"

"Not without carrying out an audit and those vaults are sealed until you reach the required age. What I will say is that the Potters are one of the oldest and wealthiest families in Britain. Your current vault is a trust vault and contains a fraction of what is held in the other two."

Harry now had an ominous feeling. "What happens to those vaults if I'm not able to claim them?"

"Without a will saying otherwise, the ministry would probably claim the vast majority of the gold and heirlooms in both vaults?"

Harry was trying to think on his feet, not easy with both Hermione's parents and an auror watching his every move. "Can I make a will, even though I'm not seventeen?"

"If you are over the age of eleven and have a Gringotts vault you can legally make a will."

"Could you help me draw one up?"

"Mr Potter, Gringotts are currently charging you for my time. How you choose to use that time is up to you. Writing a will is certainly well within my capabilities."

Harry didn't even have to think about the next bit. "It shouldn't take long. Ronald Weasley gets my Firebolt and Hermione Granger gets everything else."

"Harry no..."

"What, you want my Firebolt?"

"I don't want your Firebolt, or your money. I just want you."

"And I don't want anyone but you getting their hands on it, you know I have to do this?"

All the adults in the room could tell that there were things that weren't being said here. It was the goblin though that offered advice first.

"Perhaps if you were to tell me your concerns, I could best advise you. After all, that is what you are currently paying me for and my services don't come cheap."

Harry made up his mind. "Auror Tonks, we're going to need that confidentiality clause, this can't be repeated. I am currently entered in a tournament where I will lose my magic if I don't compete. I have no intention of competing in the next task and am trying to make sure I can still get the inheritance my parents left me."

Tonks was too shocked at that revelation to even think about making a comment while the Granger parents were more concerned with Hermione's reaction to the news. She clearly knew what Harry was up to and cuddled into her boyfriend offering support. The goblin also noticed Hermione's reaction, which sent his thoughts off in a different direction.

"Having a will in place now would leave those vaults locked down until you have a magical child reaching the appropriate age. A far safer option would be to become betrothed to a witch, but it must be done before you lose your magic."

Dan's mind had leapt ahead to see where this discussion was leading. "No bloody way, she's only fifteen!"

"Dad..."

"Don't even think of starting dad-ing me Hermione. I'm beginning to think this entire situation is a set-up, over money too?"

Harry found his arms slipping around an upset Hermione as he squared up to her father. "How could this be a set-up about money since we didn't know anything about it until just a minute ago?"

The last thing Hermione wanted was her dad and Harry getting into an argument. That situation would have the potential to go wrong so quickly, and her boyfriend could be spending Christmas in the Leaky Cauldron. "Dad, what did Professor McGonagall say would happen if I didn't want to learn magic and left Hogwarts?"

Emma had seen how protective Harry was of their daughter and also had her hand on Dan's shoulder, recognising that neither of these two would give an inch where Hermione's welfare was concerned. "Are you saying they would wipe Harry's memories?"

She had tears in her eyes as she nodded in reply, her answer came straight from the heart. "Harry's been my best friend for years, for him to not remember anything about me..."

Hermione couldn't finish what she was trying to say, bursting into tears and snuggling into Harry meant everyone there got the gist of it.

Dan though was not so easily deflected. "We were only going to have our memories wiped because your parents weren't magical, Harry's were."

Tonks had finally got her shit together and could see this was something these two had put a lot of thought into, she decided to offer her opinion. "You may not know this but Harry Potter is an icon in our world, idolised by many and respected by all. For him to deliberately give up his magic would see a backlash like never before. To be perfectly honest, being betrothed to a muggleborn witch might not be enough to stop the ministry taking extreme action. They might just blame Hermione for it, led by what passes for press in our society."

"Well that kills that idea stone dead..."

Hermione spun around in his arms to face her boyfriend. "Harry James Potter, don't you bloody dare. You know Skeeter would try and blame me anyway, a betrothal ring might be the only thing that saves me. Either way, the ministry could still obliviate the shit out of

both of us. I can live with that. At least I would have done my best to save you, to save us."

It was Tonks who asked the question they all wanted to know the answer to. "Why would you deliberately want to lose your magic Harry?"

Harry appeared to be having a private conversation with Hermione, one that didn't require any words. They were staring into each other's eyes from a distance measured in inches. It ended when Harry's shoulders slightly sagged and Hermione gave a weak smile. They rejoined the outside world when Harry replied to Tonks' question.

"You all saw Dumbledore today, the man likes to control my life. Since starting Hogwarts I have almost been killed at least once every single year. Looking back, some of it now feels like a set-up. The information we needed would suddenly become available, that kind of thing. I see myself leaving Hogwarts one of two ways, using this method or in a wooden box. Dumbledore would never let me go if he had any other option, and I know which way I prefer."

The goblin had been silent throughout this discussion but now decided to speak. "I fear that the auror may be right, in that it would be a massive shock for the boy-who-lived to deliberately walk away from magic. I still think that a betrothal is the best way to safeguard them both. The betrothal contract would need to be ironclad, but then they would have the law on their side. Goblin law would certainly support them, stopping any and all attempts to access the Potter vaults from anyone other than these two."

Harry spoke directly to Dan. "Sir, we've only just met and I can understand you being set against this. We have until the middle of February so no decisions need to be made today. Can we at least agree to try and get to know each other? If not, I can get a room at the Leaky Cauldron..."

"You will do no such thing young man. We will be spending Christmas together, that's non-negotiable. Anything else can be dealt with on a 'wait and see' basis."

Her mother's intervention actually brought a slight smile to Hermione's lips. Harry was used to listening to a Granger female

giving him good advice so nodded his acceptance. Dan wasn't stupid enough to go against his wife when she used that tone of voice. Tonks' orders were clear, wherever Harry Potter went the young auror followed.

With the initial crisis over, the goblin got back down to business. He wrote something on what appeared to be part of his desk and seconds later it slid back to reveal an opening. Two ring boxes and a roll of parchment were inside. "Each old family has its own betrothal contracts and rings. Once the family magic accepts this, the ministry won't be able to intervene without seriously breaching its own laws. The other old families won't stand for that, fearing they could be next to have wizarding law changed on them."

"Will the contract accept my godfather's signature to speak for my family?"

"Since your godfather didn't commit the crimes he was accused of, your family magic should have no problem with that. We at Gringotts are aware a certain wizard is not deceased."

This was throwing up more questions than answers, especially for Tonks, but Harry had one more request. He removed the large piece of beaten gold from his bag and sat it on the desk. "Would it be possible to sell this and convert the proceeds into muggle money?"

Dan didn't know what to make of the lad who was leaving the goblin bank with eighteen thousand pounds in his pockets and their daughter holding his hand. Harry had decided to leave what was effectively his trust vault alone for now, though did insist on completing a will. A will that saw all his possessions, except for his broomstick, going to Hermione should anything happen to him. They'd already known this holiday would be different, Hermione had never brought anyone home before. Now she had a boyfriend, a bodyguard and a possible betrothal, yes this holiday would certainly be different.

A quick stop in the bookstore, where books that mentioned betrothals were top of the shopping list. They also searched for anything on magical contracts and wizarding law in general. Having a law officer stay with them would certainly help with any research they wanted to do. Having the head of the law department stopping by later was also a bonus though they would need to talk about how

much they wanted her to know. Madam Bones had given the impression of a woman who missed nothing, and she wasn't under any confidentiality agreement.

-oOoOo-

Albus returned to the castle with his tail between his legs, and more importantly without Harry Potter. Minerva and Severus were soon summoned to his office.

"What happened? Where is he?"

"Mr Potter is spending the holidays with Miss Granger and her parents." Albus had expected an explosion when he answered his potion master's question, he wasn't disappointed.

"What? And you let that happen? How are we expected to get him interested in another girl after he stays there for a couple of weeks? There won't be enough time for it not to stick out like a sore thumb. People will notice, especially after love potions have already been mentioned."

"You think I don't know that? Amelia Bones was on the platform, he'd contacted her over the Witch Weekly story. Harry has publicly acknowledged Miss Granger as his girlfriend, that pretty much ends our other girl ploy."

"Surely you can just take him from the muggles in a day or two?"

"Amelia also thought of that. When I expressed concern over his safety, she consigned an auror guard for the duration of the holidays."

Minerva was deep in thought, the comments from Filius earlier had really gotten under her skin. She took her time before adding anything to the conversation. "Perhaps this is for the best, I was never really comfortable with the methods you were proposing to use."

The sarcasm in Snape's reply was as sharp as any potions knife. "Oh I'm so pleased for you. Do you have anything constructive to bring to this situation?"

Minerva's hard gaze took some of the strop out of Severus. "Actually I do. I think the best course of action would be for me to approach Miss Granger with my suspicions of what Harry is planning to do. The girl won't help for the good of Hogwarts or Gryffindor but she will do anything for Mr Potter. The feeling is reciprocated so we have to use that to our advantage."

Her suggestion was met with stunned silence so Minerva continued, basically thinking out loud. "Miss Granger has few friends and her new relationship is sure to strain the one with Mr Weasley. She's only half way through her time here and I'm sure she won't be looking forward to spending the next three and a half years in Hogwarts without Mr Potter. There is also the ministry's reaction to take into consideration."

Albus was thinking Minerva might have hit on something. Not that he believed Miss Granger would be able to convince Harry to do what was needed by telling her the truth. No, Albus thought he would end up having to use Harry's feelings for the young lady against him. He was quite prepared to allow Minerva to make her attempt first. Then, when it failed, she was less likely to oppose his methods, whatever those methods needed to be. At least the auror guard would ensure he was put back on the express at the end of the holidays.

-oOoOo-

Dan and Emma were lying in bed reflecting on one hell of a strange day. When they saw a copy of the magazine both parents were outraged at the treatment of their daughter, hearing the actions Harry had taken won the young man Granger bonus points. Amelia pointed out that Rita could easily put all the blame onto the Parkinson girl, the article was certainly written that way on purpose. With the results of the potion scans and Hermione getting injured, Amelia was sure she could get them to print an apology. When asked if Harry would consent to an interview over the matter he immediately refused.

"Skeeter just made up what she wanted the last time I was forced to give an interview, she would just do the same again."

Harry had thanked Madam Bones for providing an auror guard but was concerned Tonks would be missing out on Christmas with her

family. Amelia had just laughed before explaining the situation to everyone there.

"Tonks is one of the youngest aurors in my department, that means she would usually draw the worst duties over the holiday. I can assure you she will be delighted to spend the holidays guarding this family, rather than patrolling Diagonal Alley on Christmas Day."

Both parents had been impressed with Harry's thoughtful acts since they met him though Dan still intended to have a private word with his daughter's boyfriend tomorrow. They had been greatly relieved though on reading what a betrothal contract actually was.

They had read about the old families sometimes having penalty clauses written to them, amongst other barbaric things. The Potter one was nothing like that. Hermione or Harry could walk away from the contract if they so desired, and they weren't allowed to marry until they had reached their majority. From what they could see, this appeared nothing more than a legal contract that offered their daughter and Harry some protection. It would also make their daughter very happy. Neither Dan nor Emma were anywhere near agreeing to this, both though had moved away from the position of a definite no. They would just have to see what the rest of the holidays brought, Dan also intended to ensure he got to see what this young man who dared date his daughter was made of.

The also supported Hermione's determination to try and find another way for Harry, one that didn't involve him losing his magic. They could see their daughter was very happy with her boyfriend but both parents doubted any teenage relationship could survive what was potentially coming their way. With Hermione in Hogwarts and Harry attending ordinary school, this would put a far greater strain on them than they thought. The fact that Hermione would still be a witch while Harry could no longer do magic would also pile on additional stress.

Emma had asked Tonks the question that really made them feel awkward over the entire situation. "What will happen if Harry gives up his magic and then, somewhere down the line, the two split?"

"Harry would be stripped of his protection, having no magic would prevent another betrothal contract being set up. The ministry or Dumbledore could basically do what they liked."

Dan and Emma, like parents the world over, wanted what was best for their child. Here Hermione could potentially be put in a situation where Harry was banking on her to stay in a relationship no matter what. That was a large responsibility to place on her young shoulders. Both genuinely thought they would like Harry the more they got to know the lad but he was Hermione's first boyfriend and they were already talking about making a rather large commitment.

They would just have to follow the policy Emma suggested earlier and play the 'wait and see' game while monitoring the situation closely. This was certainly shaping up to be quite the Christmas.

A/N Thanks for reading

Chapter 4

The atmosphere around the breakfast table that morning was strained. Dan had asked Harry for a quiet word in his study after the lad had finished eating, totally ruining his and Hermione's appetites. Tonks thought she couldn't make the situation any worse so asked the question that had troubled her since the bank yesterday.

"Harry, you asked the goblins if your godfather could sign a betrothal agreement, who's your godfather?"

Tonks wasn't sure if it was the chance to postpone the inevitable talk with Hermione's father but Harry seemed rather eager to answer her question.

"This is really gonna push your confidentiality oath to its limits Tonks, you sure you want to know?"

This comment also really piqued her interest so the female auror quickly agreed she did indeed want to know.

"My godfather is Sirius Black."

Everyone at the breakfast table was familiar with the expression that the colour drained out of someone, none of them had ever seen such a graphic example though as Tonks hearing that news. Her bubblegum pink spiky hair actually got longer and lankier, while morphing to mousey brown. Her face changed shape too with even her eyes now taking on a different hue.

"Eh Tonks, are you ok?"

"Harry, you need to tell me where he is..."

"NO!" Tonks was taken aback at the ferocity in Harry's voice, he got hold of himself quickly though and then started to explain his outburst. "Sirius is innocent but the stupid minister wouldn't believe us. He was going to get the kiss that night even though Hermione and I both saw and spoke to Peter Pettigrew. Sirius never even got a trial, they just flung him in Azkaban."

The colour draining effect kicked into reverse and started returning Tonks' complexion and hair back to normal, normal for her that is.

This also raised a few eyebrows around the table and earning a question from Hermione. "Tonks, how are you able to do that?"

"Tell you later. Harry, will you tell me the full story?" She decided Harry needed to know the reason behind the request. "My mother's maiden name is Andromeda Black, she's Sirius' cousin. My mum was cast from the Black family because she married my dad, a muggleborn. From what I've been told, Sirius was chucked out when he went to live with your grandparents and dad. My mother always swore he would have died before betraying the Potters, they were his family."

Harry and Hermione then proceeded to tell the three adults exactly what happened that night, Tonks' hair was now shifting colours like some kind of living rainbow.

This story was almost all news to the Granger parents so Dan decided to go for more. "Some of the things you shouted at Dumbledore yesterday seemed rather serious, would you like to fill us in on exactly what goes on at that school of yours?"

The three adults once more noticed the two teens appeared to be holding a conversation without words. Hermione raised one eyebrow toward Harry and his semi-shrug in reply was apparently all they needed.

"Well, I suppose it really all started on Halloween of our first year. Ron said something that upset me and I was in the toilets crying..."

-oOoOo-

The Granger family had to end up eating Sunday lunch in the local pub, there was no time left to prepare it at home. That Tonks could drive was an added bonus. After the revelations heard earlier, both parents felt they needed a drink with their roast beef and Yorkshires. Tonks had eventually explained her abilities, abilities which saw the metamorphmagus sitting at the table with her appearance falling somewhere between a mix of Hermione and her mother. Her cover identity was Dora Granger, a visiting cousin. They could hardly say she was Hermione's boyfriend's bodyguard, those things just didn't happen in Crawley.

Once Hermione had started telling her parents what really happened to them inside Hogwarts, the floodgates had opened. Both parents found it interesting that when their daughter was speaking, she always emphasised how well Harry had done with some problem. Harry though couldn't stop the smile as he would tell how wonderful Hermione was, and that he would probably be dead without her.

After listening to their tales, both parents were beginning to agree with Harry's assessment. That was the reason they needed a drink with their Sunday lunch. When Dan asked why this was the first they were hearing all this, Hermione replied with a question of her own.

"Would you have let me return to Hogwarts if you'd known half of that?"

There really was no need for either parent to answer, what their response would be was pretty obvious.

Dan also noticed a shift in his daughter. He wasn't sure whether the change was due to getting all that off her chest, or being here with her boyfriend but Hermione was practically glowing with happiness. It was really hard to miss the other patrons of the pub's reaction to this change. A bright and bubbly beautiful young woman would always attract attention in any pub, Hermione was getting a lot of second looks. It was almost as if people were trying to confirm this girl was actually their daughter.

Harry was also enjoying himself. This was a totally new experience for him and, as an additional bonus, he had managed to avoid his scheduled 'talk' with Hermione's father. Tonks had also agreed to take both him and Hermione shopping tomorrow, another new experience to look forward too.

With their daughter in such a good mood, Emma decided she could stand a bit of teasing. She also wanted to know the answer to the question she was about to ask. "So Hermione, tell us about this Victor boy, and why you decided not to go to the ball?"

Dan though misjudged the situation and waded right in. "Yes, especially since it cost me the best part of five hundred quid for your outfit."

Hermione was mortified but Harry defended her at once. "Since it was my fault that Hermione missed the ball, I would gladly refund the cost of her dress sir. I hope you will let me pay for lunch too?"

Emma was drawing daggers at her husband. "You will do no such thing Harry, I'm sure Hermione would much rather be here with you than going to some ball with this Victor person?"

Hermione's voice was hardly above a whisper as she answered. "Victor is about eighteen, a famous sportsman who has girls following him around everywhere. I didn't even know him at the time he asked me. I'd much rather be here with Harry but we could do without being sniped at, we get enough of that in school."

Dan realised he was in trouble and attempted to explain his motives. "I'm sorry petal, I tried to make a joke and it came out wrong. I would much rather you were here with Harry too, rather than in that castle as the date of some eighteen year old sport's star."

This drew a smile from his two guests before Dan put his foot in it once more. "I was hoping to rope Harry into inviting you to the Annual Dentistry Convention's New Year Ball..."

"There will be no ropes needed, I would gladly go anywhere with Hermione. I get manipulated enough at school sir, please just ask if you want me to do something."

Harry turned straight to Hermione. "Told you I would ask this right away. Would you like to go to the ball with me?"

Hermione smiled and kissed his cheek in way of an answer. "I left my dress robes for Ron but they wouldn't have worked here anyway, we'll need to add that to our shopping tomorrow. Will your Hogwarts outfit be ok or is that something else we'll have to do?"

Emma could tell Harry's question was completely innocent and contained no malice but the effect it had on her husband was devastating. It suddenly hit home to Daniel Granger that Hermione had a new man in her life. A young man they'd earlier spent hours simply listening to his unbelievable life and adventures. Lunch was proving to be every bit as informative and uncomfortable as breakfast was for the Granger parents.

Tonks had been deep in thought for most of lunchtime and now broached the reason for it. "Harry, I would like your permission to tell my boss some of what you told us this morning?"

Harry and Hermione shared a quick conversation, this one out loud. "Obviously nothing about how we rescued Sirius."

"Or what you plan to do next. We don't know where Sirius is but that you can contact him is also something that shouldn't be mentioned."

Harry then answered the auror. "Apart from that, I don't think there is anything we said that needs to be kept quiet."

Hermione agreed. "We already told the minister what happened that night, he just didn't believe us. Do you think telling your boss will make a difference?"

"Amelia Bones is nothing like Fudge, otherwise I wouldn't be working there. You all saw how quick she was to help at the platform? She's definitely one of the good guys. If anyone at the ministry can help, it will be her."

Emma summed it up for everyone. "If it will help these two then it gets my vote."

Tonks decided she would need to take her time and get this right.

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She'd only had this duty for a few days yet Tonks found herself breaking one of the cardinal rules for an auror on protection detail, don't get emotionally involved with your subject. Their shopping trip put an end to that. How could you not love a young man who insisted on buying you a dress for the ball since you were going there to protect him? It was their quiet chat when Hermione was busy trying on some clothes that really sealed it for the young auror.

Here was the vulnerable teen that she would bet very few people got to see, Tonks felt really privileged.

"Can I ask you for some advice?"

"Sure Harry, all part of the service."

"Well, I've never had a girlfriend before and don't know what to do about Christmas. I would usually get Hermione a book I knew she wanted but that doesn't seem appropriate now. There's also Dan and Emma, what do I do about them? The Dursleys didn't really prepare me for anything like this."

Tonks heart went out to the young boy, remembering from being a teenager how important it was to get these things right. That Harry had no one else he could ask really touched her as well. "She's still Hermione, your best friend, so a book is still a good idea. Now that she's also your girlfriend, perhaps a piece of jewelry too? As to the Grangers, my advice would be to ask Hermione what to do. Neither you nor I know them well enough to choose what would be considered as appropriate for a gift, Hermione will be able to stop you making any serious errors."

Harry didn't look convinced so Tonks added a final touch. "Your girlfriend really wants you and her parents to get on, asking her advice would certainly help with that."

When they stopped shopping for a spot of lunch, Harry took Tonks' advice.

He could see Hermione was giving it some serious thought and smiled toward his protector, it appeared she was right.

Hermione was now basically thinking out loud and Harry was certainly glad he'd asked, he didn't realise there were so many pitfalls. "I think it's way too soon to give them a gift from both of us. What we have to do next is try to achieve the balance between something nice without showing off and spending too much. A magical gift might work best."

After getting all their clothes shopping done, Tonks then took both teens to Diagon Alley. Hermione helped pick gifts for her parents before they split up to do some shopping for each other. Tonks accompanied Harry to Flourish and Blotts and then a jewellers, she couldn't help but smile at his choices and was sure Hermione would love them.

It was a set of weary but happy shoppers who made it back to Crawley. Emma couldn't believe they had no bags with them. "What happened, didn't you get anything?"

Tonks just smiled before removing tiny packages from her shoulder bag and placed them in the centre of the floor. One wave of her wand and the living room contained at least triple the bags Emma expected.

"Hermione, I can't wait until you're old enough to do that when we go shopping. How did you find shopping Harry?"

"Oh it was easy Emma, I just bought whatever Hermione and Tonks told me to?"

Dan couldn't help but laugh out loud at that. He'd still to have the talk he wanted with Harry but found that postponing it was working in his favour. The more he got to know the lad, the better the talk would be. He was being given the chance to see their budding relationship in action. That their live-in bodyguard was also a very effective chaperon was certainly helping the father deal with using the boyfriend word.

Tonks had certain items still in her bag and would slip them to both teens later, Hermione's gifts were also in her bag so Harry wouldn't notice them. She was really becoming attached to this young couple and intended to do everything in her power to help them. She was sure she knew the answer to the next question but asked it anyway.

"Now that you've got the clothes Harry, perhaps later we could work on your dancing?"

Harry actually appeared embarrassed before Hermione's arm snaked around him as they had collapsed together on the sofa. "You're a slave driver Tonks, my feet are killing me. Starting tomorrow, Harry and me will put a couple of hours aside to practice our moves. I haven't danced in years, I'm betting Harry will be the same."

"Try never."

Hermione kissed his cheek. "Good, then you won't have any bad habits to unlearn." She winked at Tonks, realising the auror had

highlighted the situation before it could become a problem, and also just handed them a perfect excuse to be in each other's arms for a few hours every day.

Emma started telling them what type of dances there would be at the ball while Harry sat there, Hermione's arm around him and a smile on his face. This must be what it was like to have people looking out for you?

When Tonks sneaked into his room later that night to deliver his gifts Harry tried to thank her but she would have none of it. "Harry, without all the boy-who-lived rubbish, I think you're a pretty special young man. A young man who's already had to deal with a truck load of shit in his life. Even if it wasn't my job, I would still want to help you, and Hermione, anyway I could. Did you send Hedwig off to Sirius?"

"Yeah, he doesn't like me using Hedwig because she's pretty noticeable but I couldn't trust another owl with what she's carrying. I just hope he signs the betrothal contract. I wanted to do it face to face but it's too dangerous for him to come here, and Dumbledore is certain to revoke my Hogsmead privileges when we go back to Hogwarts."

"The old man really likes you under his thumb, doesn't he?"

"Oh everything is hunky-dory, providing I'm doing exactly what he wants me to do. You've now heard where that's got me, and where I think it's leading me."

"I assume you didn't tell Sirius what you're planning to do?"

"No, I didn't lie though. I told him Hermione was my girlfriend, and we would both benefit from having a betrothal contract. If he doesn't sign it, I don't know what I'll do. The thought of losing my best friend was bad enough, now Hermione's also my girlfriend makes it so much harder."

"Don't worry Harry, we'll get through this somehow." That Tonks said 'we' put a smile on Harry's face while the auror knew it was time to contact her boss.

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Dan watched the couple literally waltz into breakfast and Harry then hold Hermione's chair for her to sit down. It had started a few days ago as a joke, Hermione had grabbed him as they were both heading for the kitchen and they had danced their way to dinner. They were laughing as Hermione proclaimed they needed as much practice as they could get. Both parents had seen the reassurance that Hermione and Harry drew from being constantly in each other's arms.

Their dance practices had gone better than they could have hoped for. Hermione had once told them Harry was a natural on a broom, that gracefulness had carried over to dancing. Once he had the steps mapped out in his head, the two would soon be gliding around the dining room floor. Having Tonks available to shrink all the furniture was a definite bonus. They certainly wouldn't embarrass themselves at the New Year Ball.

Dan couldn't believe how quickly the time had gone, nor the change in the Granger household. Both parents had always thought their home was a happy one, the addition of Harry and Tonks brought a lot of laughter and smiles into their lives. Neither parent had ever seen their daughter appear this happy and contented. Thankfully, it was Christmas Eve and the dentists were now on holiday until after the ball, Dan might actually find time to have that much postponed talk with Harry.

It was into this happy scene that a white owl made its presence known by tapping on the window. Harry's mood immediately changed. He was delighted to see Hedwig but feared for the news his familiar might be bringing. With trembling hands he removed the package and read the note Sirius had pinned to it.

His entire face transformed to an expression of utter joy and everyone at the table knew his godfather had said yes.

Dan had to re-evaluate his opinion of Hermione, he thought he'd seen her happy before, this was an entire new level. Their daughter was clearly ecstatic with that news, she could hardly sit still.

This was the one Hermione had been worried about. They had only met Sirius once, and that wasn't under the best of circumstances. Her parents she was sure would come around (how could anyone

not love Harry?) but Sirius was always a coin toss in her mind. That the coin had come down in their favour just made her Christmas, she couldn't contain herself anymore and had to kiss her soon to be betrothed.

Her dad dramatically clearing his throat broke the kiss. "Ahem, while you two apparently don't require words to communicate, could you read what the letter says for us lesser mortals?"

That both of them were still wearing grins that covered their faces told Dan he'd got this one right, either that or nothing was going to upset them today.

Harry began reading the note.

"I was surprised to see Hedwig since our last talk but, after reading what she was carrying, understood you wouldn't trust this information with any other owl. Surprise turned to shock when I read what you were asking permission for. There was no surprise at your choice of young lady Harry, Hermione impressed the hell out of me when we met and Remus swears you two are fated to be together."

Hermione had her head on his shoulder at this point, her smile illuminating the room.

"I want to thank you both again for saving my life, craziest and bravest thing I've ever seen. I understand that I'm not been given the full story here and look forward to hearing it when next we meet. You are my godson and one of the few people on this planet that I would give my very life for, how could I possibly deny you something that clearly means the world to you..."

Harry broke off embarrassed. "Em, Sirius then goes on to say that I better treat Hermione right and he'll also be having a talk with me next time he sees me."

He then spoke to his girlfriend. "Sirius hopes we can accept this as our Christmas gift, since he hasn't been able to do much shopping."

Hermione clearly didn't have a problem with that. "Best present I ever got."

"I like this godfather of yours..."

Dan was interrupted by Tonks springing to her feet, wand raised and ready for battle. "Someone just apparated into the back garden."

She moved cautiously over to the French doors before visibly relaxing. "It's Madam Bones." As Tonks went to greet her boss, Emma snatched the documents out of Harry's hands and quickly hid them in one of the kitchen drawers.

Amelia had been amazed at the report from Auror Tonks. What brought her here though was not what the report contained, but more the conclusions her auror reached. This led Amelia to assume there was a lot more going on that, due to the confidentiality clause, Tonks simply couldn't reveal. The Head of the DMLE would butt heads with anyone to support and protect her aurors. If she was going up against Dumbledore, and possibly Fudge, she wanted a bit of conformation first. This brought her to Crawley on Christmas Eve.

She was soon sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee in her hands, this wasn't a social call though so Amelia got down to business.

"Harry, I've been reading about your adventures and have honestly been amazed. For someone in my line of work though, you can understand if I'm slightly skeptical and would like some sort of proof."

The boy in question nodded, he'd been there and still had trouble believing some of it. "How can I help?"

"I thought that confirming one part was correct would help corroborate the rest of your stories. I have no wish to enter the chamber of secrets to see a thousand year old basilisk, actually that's a lie. I absolutely do but that's not an option available to us here today, let's mark that one down for later. I thought if you could cast your patronus, that for me would be all the proof I need for the moment."

Hermione had a very important question to ask first. "Won't Harry get into trouble for using magic?"

"Miss Granger, the first thing your auror guard was required to do would be to erect wards around this home, wards that probably just

warned her someone had apparated onto the property. The ministry obviously recognises those wards and will assign any normal magic use to your guard. Any spell outside what would be considered normal will see a squad of aurors on your doorstep within two minutes. I already cleared use of the patronus charm for this morning."

Emma, like her daughter, also had a question. "What's so special about this spell that will have you believing the rest of Harry's story?"

"Mrs Granger, the patronus charm is one of the hardest spells to master. That degree of difficulty increases by at least a factor of ten when trying to cast it in the presence of a Dementor. When you take into account there was almost a hundred of those creatures there that night, well you could easily count on the fingers of one hand the number of witches or wizards in this country who could hope to cope with that situation. To do so while only thirteen at the time leaves you with only one name, Harry James Potter. While I have no intention of bringing Dementors anywhere near your home, seeing Harry cast the charm will corroborate his story enough for me."

They all traipsed out to the back garden where Hermione once more kissed Harry, for luck of course. Tonks was standing next to Dan and Emma, explaining what was happening. "The patronus charm is a manifestation of positive energy which requires a strong, happy thought to cast. Hermione was just making sure Harry was in the right frame of mind to perform..."

Tonks words died in her throat as a magnificent silver stag was suddenly walking around the garden, searching for enemies. With a whispered 'Merlin', she took a hand from both parents in hers and allowed them to see 'Prongs'.

Dan and Emma could suddenly sense the positive energy surging through them, just from being in the proximity of the spell. It felt like being wrapped in a warm and gentle love. When Tonks took them by the hand and the skin contact allowed them to see, both parents had tears of wonder in their eyes. As the shimmering creature made its way toward Hermione, nuzzling her with its muzzle, they literally saw her light up with joy.

"Madam Bones, Harry has been teaching me the spell. Could I try it please?"

Amelia could only nod, having never seen a patronus that was so corporeal before. She half expected Harry to take out a carrot and the creature to munch on it. When the girl proceeded to produce a corporeal from too, any doubts Amelia had over Tonks' proposal vanished.

Hermione was sure she was going to get it this time. It was Christmas Eve, she was spending it with Harry, a Harry who she was now sure would be her betrothed. Add to that her mother and father were about to see her perform magic for the very first time and her confidence was understandable. Hermione also had Prongs nuzzling her, almost as if he was calling to her patronus. The sheer amount of joy and love currently running through her body meant Hermione was certain she would be able to cast the charm that had eluded her up until now. When a silver doe joined Prongs, the positive feelings generated in the garden increased exponentially.

The monocle had dropped from Amelia's eye while Tonks had tears of joy running down her cheeks. Emma was first to find her voice. "I'm assuming this is unusual?"

It was Tonks who whispered her reply, there was what could only be considered reverence in her voice. "Emma, this is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. The charm is so difficult to perform that a couple who can both cast it is rare. As you can probably imagine, matching forms is even rarer. What you are seeing here is a physical manifestation of what these two mean to each other. I swear they will have to come through me first before I will allow anyone to harm these two."

Both silver creatures were nuzzling each other in a clear display of affection before slowly disappearing, Hermione soon found herself swept up in Harry's arms as he raised her feet off the ground and swirled her about. "Love, that was magnificent. You are the best."

The kiss that followed their celebration was so tender that all the adults felt as if they were intruding on a special moment, they quietly made their way back into the kitchen.

"Well Tonks, are you up for this assignment? You realize of course that certain parties will make it as difficult as possible for you?"

"Yes I'm ready, I just hope Harry doesn't think I've gone behind his back because I never mentioned this to him."

Amelia thought for a moment before answering that. 'I'm on my way to spoil someone's Christmas, I'll come back and let you know how I got on. We can tell him then.'

Amelia got ready to leave and noticed that the two teens were now waltzing around the back garden to music only they could hear. The morning frost on the grass was just being ignored. She smiled as she apparated up to Scotland, at least she would get to see Susan.

Dan and Emma both wanted to know what Tonks was up to, they were delighted with her answer and promised not to tell Harry or Hermione for the moment.

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When Minerva led Amelia Bones into his office, Albus knew this wasn't good news. "What brings you to Hogwarts Amelia?"

Minerva was about to leave when she was asked to stay. "This concerns you too Minerva, both as deputy headmaster and head of Gryffindor. My auror has been staying with Harry and Hermione and some of the stories she was hearing about Hogwarts worried her greatly. She was so concerned, she asked Harry if I could be contacted with some of the details. He said yes and that's why I'm here, I want some answers."

This was bad, Albus just didn't know how bad it was going to get. Amelia soon gave him a clue when she pulled a scroll from her robes, a scroll that was full of questions.

"Now, how far have you gotten with the investigation on who actually entered Harry into this competition?"

Both Minerva and Albus glanced at each other, waiting to see which of them wanted to field the first question. They needn't have worried, Amelia had more than enough to go around.

Amelia was relentless, cutting straight through Dumbledore's bluster and noting answers beside her questions. Questions that just kept getting more awkward for the Hogwarts pair.

"So no one but Hermione Granger could figure a basilisk was attacking the children, and you did nothing?"

Amelia was enjoying watching them squirm, and cranked the pressure up another notch. "My counterpart in the department of mysteries is very interested in this diary that could possess a young girl, he's desperate to get his hands on it."

Dumbledore certainly didn't want that to happen. "Harry asked me if he could have it, I didn't see the harm. He'd destroyed any magic that the book had contained."

Amelia noted that on her list as she got ready to reveal the real reason she was here. "I expect to be seeing him soon so will ask him then. Now I have quite a few more questions here about employing a professor who had You-know-who growing out the back of his head, while using this school to lay a trap for him. Since I don't expect these questions to receive any clearer answers than my previous ones, I really don't see any other alternative." Amelia paused for effect, deliberately making them wait for this.

"It is abundantly clear to me, even from this preliminary investigation, that Hogwarts is not a safe environment for Harry Potter."

As she expected, Dumbledore and McGonagall were up in arms about this. "Hogwarts is the safest place in the entire country."

"Professors, when you teach students something, you don't expect them just to take your word for it? You back that word up with facts, figures and practical demonstrations. The facts and figures clearly paint a different picture here, while the practical demonstrations could see you both charged with child endangerment. James and Lily Potter did not die so their son could join them before he makes it out of his teens. He will either be leaving Hogwarts or have one of my aurors accompanying him in this castle."

Dumbledore wasn't about to stand for that. "You haven't the authority to do that Amelia, Hogwarts internal matters don't come under your jurisdiction."

"They most certainly do if there is a complaint made against the school. I know a couple whose daughter has been attacked by a troll,

given detention in the Forbidden forest at night, taught by a possessed professor who had a dark lord growing out the back of his head, petrified by a basilisk, need I go on? I can assure you the Grangers would swear a complaint against you at the drop of a hat. If you don't want to see Harry Potter going to a competitor, or being home schooled, he will have an auror guard with him until at least the summer holidays."

Dumbledore objected on several grounds but Amelia kept coming back to what had happened in the last three and a half years, making a complete nonsense out of every one of his "Harry is safe at Hogwarts' arguments. "I understand Harry needs to be at Hogwarts for the tournament, that could easily be arranged if he was being home schooled or attending another magical school. Let me be as blunt as I possibly can here, the status quo is not an option I'm prepared to allow."

Amelia held her hand up to stop any more protests. "We're all agreed that someone entered Harry's name in this tournament to cause him harm. It's also undisputable that the only time Harry has received help from the Hogwarts faculty was when the dementors attacked during a quidditch match, not a track record that inspires me with any confidence in the staff of Hogwarts. Time and time again, you have failed to protect the boy. There will be changes made today, before it's too late."

She had no idea but Amelia had them over a barrel, both Albus and Minerva understood Harry would jump at the slightest chance of leaving Hogwarts. At least this way they could be assured he would be coming back after the holidays. The concessions Amelia had wrung out of the school though would certainly severely restrict their ability to influence Mr Potter's actions.

The head auror had effectively dealt with the Hogwarts side of things, and had plans in place to stop the minister interfering too. Explaining to Fudge that the ministry offering Harry Potter protection was a good thing, therefore a popular move with the voting public, shouldn't be difficult. There was always the prospect of a picture beside Harry and a thousand year old basilisk to sweeten the deal if she needed it. Cornelius would sell his mother for publicity like that.

Harry could insist that Skeeter wasn't allowed anywhere near the chamber, thus laying down a warning to anyone else who thought

they could write what they liked about him and Miss Granger. The Prophet would just have to send someone else to report on the event, there was no way the paper would want to miss out on a story like this. It was blatantly obvious to Amelia that Harry Potter had no idea of the sway he held in the British Magical community. Even without the boy-who-lived tab, he was still the sole heir to the Potter estates and fortune. She intended to rectify that lack of knowledge as soon as possible.

Amelia left Hogwarts with all her missions accomplished. She got to see Susan, help protect Harry and had certainly ruined Dumbledore's Christmas. She headed back to Crawley, ready to break the news to Tonks and Harry.

A/N Thanks for reading

Chapter 5

Cornelius had sent Dumbledore away with a flea in his ear, and it felt really good. Amelia had briefed him on what she was proposing, the reason she gave for her actions simply terrified the Minister of Magic. Harry Potter was being forced to compete in a ministry sponsored tournament that could see the lad terribly injured or, Merlin forbid, something a tad more permanent. He was also forcibly reminded by Amelia why the tournament was originally stopped, and why it was now deemed strictly for adults only. The head of the DMLE had then posed the question, should any harm befall the boy-who-lived, who would the public blame for such a catastrophe?

The minister had visions of the lad's broken body being savaged by that dragon, and the wizarding public serving up one Cornelius Fudge as its next meal. An auror guard to watch the lad's back and help train him for the remaining two tasks suddenly sounded a wonderful idea to the minister. That Harry Potter didn't feel safe inside Hogwarts and the ministry was coming to his aid is certainly a policy Cornelius wanted his name associated with.

He'd been against this stupid tournament from the start but Dumbledore had spouted on about the spirit of international co-operation and, as usual, gotten his own way. Well the great Albus Dumbledore didn't get his way today, the Minister of Magic had put him in his place. If the headmaster couldn't keep Harry Potter safe, the ministry would. Dumbledore would just have to suck on one of those infernal lemon drops he was so fond of, since he would find no comfort at the ministry over this matter.

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Harry sat there, not knowing what to think. Hermione appeared to be in the same state of mind as him so he glanced around the room for some inspiration. Tonks was clearly worried, she'd gone out on a limb for him and was awaiting his reaction. Dan and Emma seemed quite happy at the news, he would have to think that one over later. His initial reaction was to start ranting and raving about people attempting to arrange his life for him, that approach would do no good here though. There was also the fact that he'd never been happier than he was at the moment, that would certainly be reflected in his answer.

Madam Bones though was waiting to hear that answer, he didn't want to keep her waiting any longer.

"Let me see if I've got this right. Tonks is going to come to Hogwarts with me on security detail? She'll attend our classes and sit with me at meals, we'll also have our own accommodation?"

"Yes, she can't protect you in the Gryffindor dorm without sleeping at the bottom of the stairs, not something I'm prepared to ask her to do. You will still be able to frequent the common room, and invite any of your friends back to your new accommodation."

Harry now looked toward Hermione to give her his thoughts. "I won't have to listen to Ron and Neville snore, I also can't wait to see Snape's face our first potions class. Want to take a guess how many points he takes off me?"

Hermione smiled at the truth behind that last remark, she also gave her boyfriend her thoughts on the matter. "We'll still get to see each other just as often only now we have an auror to help us with training. You'll get flack off certain sections of the school but then again, you usually get that anyway."

Harry had another thought. "I can't even be accused of using Tonks to cheat in class, I don't have any exams to sit this year."

Tonks visibly relaxed as Harry warmed to the idea. She would apologise in private later for not telling him before now. She wasn't sure if her boss would go for the initial idea, or if it was even possible.

Amelia was also pleased at how things were working out. "I would like to collect you the day before you're due to return and we can travel to Hogwarts by Portkey. That will give you a chance to settle in to your new arrangements, and also allows us to visit the chamber of secrets. That reminds me, do you still have that diary?"

"I gave it to Dobby, we used it to free the little guy from Lucius Malfoy since I hid a sock inside it. Would you like me to call him?"

Dobby couldn't stand still, he was so happy to be in Harry's presence again. His mood changed though when he was asked the question. "Dobby, do you still have that diary?"

His ears folded down the side of his head as the little elf gave the appearance of a naughty puppy. "No Harry Potter, the headmaster asked Dobby for that diary when Dobby began working at Hogwarts."

The word 'Dumbledore' was uttered by Amelia, though it sounded more like a growl. She then explained to the company the reason for her reaction. "I asked him if he had the diary, the old fox said that he gave it to Harry. He didn't lie, just didn't tell me that it was once more in his possession. The man is infuriating to deal with, I must have asked twenty questions today yet left there no wiser than when I entered his office."

"Dobby, could you get it back?"

The little elf hated disappointing anyone, but especially the wizard who set him free. "Dobby is sorry Harry Potter sir. As Dobby works for Hogwarts, Dobby is not allowed to do anything the headmaster doesn't want done."

Harry was beginning to understand that with Dobby, it was sometimes what he wasn't saying that you needed to pay attention to. "Could you get the diary if you worked for someone else, and that someone else asked you to? Would you like to work for someone else?"

"Dobby would love to work for someone else, is Harry Potter wishing for an elf?"

"Well, it would get us the diary and..."

Harry never got to say any more as Dobby pounced on him, hugging his legs. All saw the spark of magic that passed between them before a beaming Dobby disappeared.

Hermione asked the question that she feared the answer to. "What just happened there?"

Tonks was trying to contain her laughter. "It would seem your little elf friend learned his lesson well. You helped Dobby trick himself free from Lucius Malfoy, he just tricked Harry into being his new family."

Before any more could be said, Dobby returned with the diary. Harry took it and passed the ruined book over to Madam Bones. "Does Dumbledore know you took the diary back?"

Dobby had a little twinkle in his large eyes. "Was Dobby supposed to let the headmaster know Dobby took his property back?"

This time Tonks couldn't hold her laughter. "Oh Dobby, you're sure going to liven things up around here."

Wearing a large smile, Dobby disappeared to begin working for his new family.

Emma had waited long enough. "Will someone please tell me what just happened, preferably in words I can understand?"

"Well Emma, I think you're going to enjoy your holiday even more now. Dobby is a house elf who enjoys looking after his family. As Harry is staying here, the little guy will be looking after everyone. Cooking, cleaning, ironing, you name it, Dobby will take care of it."

Emma's jaw was almost on the floor at these remarks from Tonks. "You mean Dobby is a magical servant, like a cook or a butler, and he now works for Harry?"

Tonks thought she would let Emma's analogy stand so just nodded her agreement.

They were drawn out of their discussion by Amelia calling Dumbledore every name she could think of. Her wand was in her hand and her scan of the diary was obviously responsible for her outburst. "Excuse me folks, that old man has a lot to answer for. This diary reeks of a dark magical residue. It should have been thoroughly investigated, not kept hidden from the ministry. I need to get this to the department of mysteries. I think it would be far better if Dumbledore didn't know we had this until we can investigate the diary fully."

Neither of the teens disagreed with that opinion as Amelia excused herself, leaving to pass the diary on. She already knew who T.M. Riddle was, thanks to Harry, and had no intention of delaying. That

Dumbledore had this for eighteen months and done nothing was the main reason for her earlier outburst.

Before leaving, Amelia apologised for not being able to do more for Sirius. "The evidence against him may be all circumstantial, but it's pretty damning. Linked with the fact that he escaped from Azkaban, something that's never been done before, I just couldn't convince Fudge there may have been a miscarriage of justice. Without Pettigrew, his position won't shift."

Both Harry and Hermione had seen Fudge that night Sirius was supposed to be kissed, they expected no other answer.

The minute Amelia left, Tonks then attempted to apologise to Harry. "I'm really sorry Harry, I didn't know if Madam Bones would go for it but I should have spoken to you first."

Harry recognised what Tonks was doing and stopped her. "People normally pull these things so I'll do what they want me to do. You are trying to help, and are prepared to give up months of your time to do so. That means a lot to me Tonks, thanks."

There was something Emma wanted to ask, and now seemed like the best time. "Does this mean you won't be deliberately losing your magic Harry?"

Harry could see the hope in her eyes, the same shade of brown eyes that he had fallen in love with. He hated to disappoint her but had to be honest. "Nothing has really changed, other than I will have Tonks and Hermione watching my back now. We got one over on Dumbledore this time but that would mainly be due to surprise, it won't happen again. Madam Bones might be able to swing ministry protection for me now, that ministerial support would vanish if I attempted to leave Hogwarts."

Hermione snuggled into Harry, she knew he was right. "He was almost killed in the last task, and no one expects the remaining two to be any easier. Dumbledore will still be controlling everything, Snape will still be sniping away while McGonagall continues to do her best ostrich impression and buries her head in the sand. Having Tonks with us should make what Harry plans to do easier."

Harry had a thought though. "Will you get into any trouble when I don't compete in the next task? Maybe this isn't such a good idea after all, it could ruin your career?"

"The confidentiality clause should protect me, and I'll have Amelia Bones in my corner. I should be ok."

At that Dobby popped back in "Harry Potter sir, Dobby has prepared lunch for you and your Grangers in the dining room."

This was met by stunned silence, until Emma shot off the sofa and headed for the dining room. Seeing everything laid out, and the room shining like a new pin, took her breath away. "Dobby, this is fantastic. Do you want to cook our Christmas Dinner too?"

This was exactly the right thing to say, the elf was bouncing up and down with excitement. One mouthful of food and Dan was almost joining him. His wife was many things, a wonderful cook was not one of them though. The meal was so good, he even decided not to tease Harry about the 'your Grangers' comment. Dobby could call him whatever the hell he liked as long as he kept cooking food like this.

Emma was, if anything, happier than her husband. Not only did she not have to cook, the dishes disappeared as soon as the plates were empty. This was shaping up to be a very merry Christmas.

Hermione wanted to sound off at Harry about the Dobby situation but bit her tongue. Harry was clearly blameless, the elf in question was ecstatic and both her parents appeared delighted with what had happened. Harry now had a bodyguard and an elf to take care of him. With only her parents' signatures needed for her to become betrothed to Harry, she had no intention of saying the slightest thing that might hamper their decision.

-oOoOo-

Minerva McGonagall wasn't having a very merry Christmas, nor was she burying her head in the sand. No, the head of Gryffindor was no ostrich, the big problem being she knew exactly what was going on. That was why she was currently trying to climb inside a bottle of single malt Scotch whisky.

The witch had taken Amelia's verbal lashing personally today, Minerva knew she deserved it. She could also trace her current troubles back to a single event. A certain cat had spent the day on Privet Drive, even one day was enough to see that this would be totally the wrong environment to leave the recently orphaned Potter baby.

Albus Dumbledore didn't listen to her, Albus never listened to her, so a baby was left on a doorstep. She didn't want Harry anywhere near this competition either but was again overruled. There was no way of dressing the facts up, she had failed Harry Potter at every turn since that night. Hard as that was to swallow, that was not the reason she was hitting the bottle.

No, what was really eating the proud witch alive was that she was going to continue failing the lad. Albus obviously had plans for the boy, plans that she wasn't privy too. She had placed her trust in Albus many, many years ago and she couldn't change now. To do so would be to admit that for all those years she had been wrong. She had to hope that Albus had it all figured out and it would make sense in the end, that didn't make the now any easier though.

-oOoOo-

Harry was fairly racking up the new experiences, and tonight was certainly one of them. He'd just entered his room after accompanying the Grangers to the midnight Christmas Eve service at their local church. The service was beautiful, and he discovered Hermione had a lovely singing voice. Dobby had mugs of cocoa, with tiny mallows floating on top, waiting on them as they came home.

He was just about to get ready for bed when there was a quiet knock on his door. Harry expected Tonks, or even Hermione, not Dan and Emma.

"We'll only keep you a moment Harry, Dan had something to say and it just couldn't wait."

Harry didn't think Hermione's father would wait until now to have their chat, he was right.

"Harry, I don't think I've ever seen Hermione happier. As a parent, that's exactly what you want for your child. What we're here for now is to make her happier still. I think we all know what Hermione really wants for Christmas, the deal is though that we need to be there when you give it to her?"

Harry wasn't sure what Dan meant, and was too embarrassed to say so, until Emma took a familiar document from behind her back. Last time he'd seen it was when Emma hid it in her kitchen so Madam Bones wouldn't discover the letter from Sirius.

"Dan and I had a discussion earlier, we both signed this..."

Emma was cut off from saying any more as Harry grabbed her in a hug, realising he was wrapped around the wrong Granger girl, Harry jumped back to find Dan waiting with his hand outstretched. It was quickly grasped and all Harry could say was 'thank you'. He said it so many times that Dan and Emma left his room laughing.

Harry immediately turned to his familiar. "Hey girl, fancy a flight to Gringotts? I want this registered as soon as possible, just in case someone decides to try and stop it."

Harry eventually went to bed though he didn't expect to get much sleep, he was far too excited for that. This was easily going to be his best Christmas ever before Hermione's parents paid him a late night visit. Now, it was going to be the best day of his life.

-oOoOo-

Ron Weasley woke on Christmas morning to the dorm being busier than at any other Christmas he had spent at Hogwarts. He soon realised something was missing, or rather someone. He glanced up at the smart dress robes that were hanging from his four poster and knew what was missing. He'd spent the last three Christmases with Harry, but now the bed next to him was empty.

He resolved to try and fix his friendship with his two best friends, he might even write to them tomorrow and tell them how he got on at the ball. That was for later though, now there were presents that needed opening.

-oOoOo-

Harry must have eventually fallen asleep, he surmised this since he was woken by a large pair of eyes staring into his from a distance of about two inches away.

"Merry Christmas Harry Potter sir, Dobby is wanting to give Harry Potter his present now?"

Harry found a garishly wrapped present pushed into his chest, he reached for his glasses before beginning to open his first present of the day.

Dobby couldn't contain his excitement, this was also the first present the little elf had ever given. "Dobby bought the wool from his wages at Hogwarts, Dobby knitted them himself."

Harry found a pair of socks inside the wrapping paper. Pair though only referred to there being two of them, since one was green and the other blue. Both though had Golden Snitches embroidered all over them. They were so Dobby that Harry loved them, his wide smile made the little guy's day.

He also knew the perfect present to give him back. Tonks and Hermione had originally gotten him to buy these for a laugh, he would be wearing his 'Dobby' socks today though and knew the elf would love these.

"Sorry Dobby but I haven't had time to wrap them yet."

Dobby stared at the gift in awe. The socks were bright green but covered in white geometric shapes to represent snowflakes. The reindeer face on each sock brought tears of joy to Dobby. When Harry pressed the figure, there was a tiny red light that illuminated the reindeer's nose and music played too. Dobby thought they were the finest pair of socks he'd ever laid eyes on. That Harry Potter was giving them to Dobby as a gift overwhelmed the little guy's emotions.

Once Harry managed to talk Dobby down, the little guy left to get things ready for his family on this special day. The excitement was also running riot through Harry's veins and he knew it would be pointless to return to bed. Deciding to get an early start, he headed for the shower.

Excitement was running high in the entire Granger household too so when Harry left the bathroom, Hermione was standing waiting on him. A Christmas kiss later, Hermione slipped in to have her own shower while Harry headed downstairs. Dan and Emma were already up, wishing Harry a Merry Christmas.

"We usually have breakfast before exchanging gifts, is this ok with you?"

Harry could only nod in answer to Dan's question, before attending Hogwarts he never got any presents.

Emma seemed to be about as hyper as Dobby. "We just entered the kitchen this morning and our tea appeared on the table, just as we like it too! How much does it cost to hire an elf?"

"I have no idea, Dobby and I never actually got around to working out any details."

The real reason for all the excitement was soon revealed. "I just can't wait to see Hermione's reaction when you give her the present she wants?"

This had the two males smiling as they awaited Hermione's arrival so breakfast could begin. She actually descended the stairs with Tonks in tow, the auror was originally going to hang back and let the family have their time together. Hermione was having none of that. They were going to be spending a lot of time together so Tonks had better get used to being treated as one of the family. Harry had also slipped Hermione money to get Tonks a Christmas present while she shopped in Diagon Alley.

Dobby's breakfast just wasn't done justice as everyone had their mind on other things. It was soon time to open presents and Hermione did the honours by handing them out. Tonks was surprised to receive a gift, she was amazed after unwrapping it.

"Harry, Hermione, this is too much!"

"Being my bodyguard, you'll probably need it at some point. In fact I think both Hermione and I should get one too!"

Emma thought that the clearly animal hide jacket was beautiful, if a bit strange. There was obviously something else going on though by the way Tonks was holding it. "That's gorgeous, what type of jacket is it?"

The auror was running her hand across what was once a Chinese Fireball, also worth a good few months wages to her. "This is dragon hide Emma. Not only is it beautiful, it's the equivalent of a bullet proof vest. Madam Bones has been trying to make dragon skin vests standard auror issue but the minister keeps blocking it because of the expense."

Emma just had to touch the hide, that it came from a real dragon was fascinating to the dentist. This was like touching another world.

Dan though was agreeing with Harry. "After listening to some of your stories, I think you and Hermione both wearing something that could protect you is a brilliant idea."

Hermione handed her parents a gift from Harry and they were suddenly wary of opening it. From Tonks' reaction, her gift, while practical, was also obviously expensive. They were worried that Harry had gone over the top. Emma was relieved and delighted to open an exquisite snow globe, she was thanking Harry until Hermione asked her to sit it on the table. When her daughter touched the snow globe with her wand, it increased in size until it was about the diameter of a basketball. Both parents also noticed that the scene inside was still snowing without it being shaken, it was clearly a magical item.

"Mum, dad, that's Hogwarts castle."

Hermione began pointing out specific parts of the castle like Gryffindor tower to her shocked parents, when evening fell inside the globe and the castle lights began to come on, Emma had to hug the boy who bought them this wonderful gift.

"Hermione has described Hogwarts to us many times but this makes all those descriptions come alive. Thank you Harry, it's beautiful!"

The three who'd conspired to find the right balance of gift were now feeling pretty smug with themselves.

When Harry opened his present from Hermione, it was his chin's turn to hit the floor. The last time he'd been this close to Hungarian Horntail, it was trying to kill him.

"If Tonks needs one of these, then you certainly do too! I also think you'll look great in it."

Hermione expected grief from her parents later for emptying out her savings account to buy Harry's gift, she thought the peace of mind it would give her was well worth it. She didn't know what they had planned and there would be no grief coming from them today.

She was delighted with the two books Harry bought her but loved his surprise of a necklace, the two entwined gold H's were beautiful. Harry put it on her neck before providing a gentle kiss on her lips. It was time.

"I have one more surprise for you Hermione, it was a surprise for me too." Harry removed a very recognisable ring box from his pocket.

Hermione's eyes were like saucers as she stared at Harry, his slight nod had her jumping on him before untangling herself and launching at her parents. She was doing her best Dobby impression by bouncing up and down with excitement while squealing 'thank you' between breaths. Tonks was hugging Harry in congratulations and there were beaming smiles everywhere.

Hermione returned to Harry and took a deep, calming breath. "I'm ready Harry." He took the ring out the box and slipped it on her finger as she spoke the required words. "While I wear this ring, I will consider no other."

She was smiling while removing Harry's matching ring from the box. When he repeated the same phrase as the ring was placed on his finger, there was a spark of magic that jumped between both bands and their betrothal was sealed. The rings resized to fit snugly but neither Harry nor Hermione noticed, they were too wrapped up in each other. When Emma and Dan then joined in the hug, Tonks was left standing until Harry reached a hand out to her.

"Since Sirius can't be here, you can stand in for him." There was hardly a dry eye in the house but it was at this moment that Harry had a thought. "Dobby?"

-oOoOo-

Sirius had made his way to Hogsmead, he wanted to be closer to Harry since he had a bad feeling about this bloody tournament. Padfoot was currently curled up in a cave, trying to keep warm against the harsh Scottish winter and ignore the hunger pangs. Bad as things were, this was still his best Christmas for over a decade. Sirius was sure he was going to have to find a better food source than rats though, they were beginning to seriously affect his mind.

His eyes were telling him that the strangest house elf they'd ever seen had just popped into the cave, his ears were informing him that the little guys socks were playing 'Rudolf the red nosed reindeer'. It was his nose though that had his mouth watering, it was screaming that there was roast turkey in the basket that the elf had in his hands.

"Mr Black sir, I is being Dobby. Your godson said Dobby had to wish you a Merry Christmas."

A shaggy black dog transformed into a shaggy Sirius Black. "You know Harry?"

The elf seemed to stand taller at that question, though the effect was ruined for Sirius by the musical socks that had tiny red flashing lights on them. "Dobby is Harry Potter's elf, come to give a present to his godfather."

"How did you find me Dobby?"

"A good elf can always find his master's family. You is Harry Potter's family. This is for you."

The basket enlarged and Sirius noticed it also contained other items as well as the delicious smelling food. There were changes of clothing, including what looked like a warm jacket. Even a sleeping bag had been included, this was sheer luxury to the former prisoner of Azkaban and it now looked like he was set for a merry Christmas after all.

"Once Harry Potter's Grangers knew Dobby could find you, they added many things to the basket. Mr Granger is not much bigger than you."

Sirius couldn't contain himself any longer and was chomping on a leg of turkey while trying to digest what Dobby was saying. "Does that mean that Harry is staying with Hermione's folks?"

Dobby nodded vigorously, causing his ears to flap in time to the music. "Harry Potter is spending the holidays with his betrothed's family and auror Tonks."

Sirius wasn't sure whether it was the word auror or the name Tonks that had the turkey sticking in his throat. He was quickly searching in the basket for something to wash the turkey down with when he couldn't believe his luck, someone had very generously slipped a few beers into the basket too.

As the blockage was soon clear, there was something Sirius just had to ask the strange little elf, the music was already driving him nuts. "Dobby, what's the deal with the socks?"

Dobby's large eyes went a little misty as he answered. "Harry Potter gave them to Dobby as a Christmas present, Dobby thinks they are wonderful."

Sirius couldn't really argue with the devotion the elf obviously had to his godson, he then started asking all about what was happening in Harry's life while forcing himself to take his time and at least chew his food. Discovering that the auror Dobby had mentioned actually was a member of his family pleased him greatly. His mother would be turning in her grave at the thought of another member of her family working as an auror.

Dobby was delighted to sit and chat about his favorite subject, Harry Potter. He was quite happy to sit and talk for hours about the boy who had saved him, he would know instantly if someone back home needed Dobby. The elf was also having a great Christmas.

-oOoOo-

Ronald Weasley had a shitty Christmas. With no one really to talk to, he'd hung out with the twins. Fred and George were looking forward to the ball but were certain any attempts to spike the punch would be thwarted. They came to the brilliantly simple decision of drinking their illicit booze before they went. Ron then made his first

monumental mistake of the day, he joined his brothers and Lee in drinking the afternoon away.

Ron arrived at the ball looking good in Harry's robes and, with his date on his arm, feeling wonderful. It all went rapidly downhill from there. The alcohol began to really affect him during the meal, causing Ron to throw up over his now sobbing date. A raging McGonagall led him away and hours later he woke on his bed with a splitting headache. With no idea of the time, Ron staggered down to the common room hopping he could gauge just how much trouble he was in. When he found Neville kissing his sister, all hell broke loose.

He was now lying in bed on Boxing Day morning with a black eye, courtesy of Neville, and that was before Ginny got her wand out from wherever she had stashed it. McGonagall had to once more intercede in a Weasley family fight and Ron thought he might have managed to accrue enough detentions to see him through until Easter.

For the first time he could ever remember Ron didn't want to go down to breakfast, and it wasn't just the after effects of the alcohol. The entire house had rallied behind Neville and Ginny meaning no one would be talking to Ron, though Malfoy would be sure to have something to say on the matter. He also didn't need his classes in divination to know with utter certainty that he would be receiving a howler from his mother in the very near future.

Ron was getting a glimpse of what his life would be without Harry and Hermione in it, he didn't like it one bit. There would need to be some ground made up if Ron wanted them both to be his friends again but he swore to try his hardest to accomplish that. He just hoped that they would want him back, and that they were having a better Christmas than he was.

-oOoOo-

Hermione was also lying in bed on Boxing Day morning, her mood though was the polar opposite of Ron's. Every time she looked at the ring Harry had placed on her finger, her entire face broke into a wide grin. She could quite happily spend the entire day glancing at it, just to confirm their betrothal was real. Hermione was drawn out of

her day dreaming by the sound of Tonks loudly swearing up a storm, she was out her bed with her wand in her hand in a second.

Harry was ahead of her though and she also heard her parents' door opening just as he got to the auror's room. A clearly raging Tonks was sitting on the bed with today's issue of the Prophet open in her hands. She looked at Harry before filling him in.

"Rita strikes again. What I wouldn't give to get something on that bitch."

She handed the offending newspaper to the other four who were now in her room, the headlines said it all really.

Boy-who-couldn't-be-bothered

The article went on to vilify Harry for ignoring a prestigious ministry event, and wizarding traditions, to spend the holidays with his muggle-born girlfriend in the muggle world. Rita didn't come right out and say it but any reader would be left with the impression that Hermione was a bad influence on their savior, and that a pureblood princess needed to be quickly found for the famous young wizard.

Dan was raging at another attack on his daughter. "I can't believe that Harry not going to a ball is front page news. I also can't believe that this bitch would pull this shit again after Amelia had gone to the paper over their last article."

Harry had his arms around his betrothed and a wicked smile on his face. "You just gave me an idea Dan, I think it's time to start using my fame to help us. Hermione is the only girl for me, and I'm not about to stand about with my hands in my pockets while the Prophet attacks her."

Sirius and Remus would have recognised the look on Harry's face, James Potter used the very same expression before pulling a big prank. "The book Madam Bones sent me on wizarding customs, traditions and laws is brilliant. I'm going to blast Skeeter right out the water and use her own printed words to do it. Hermione love, would you help me write a letter to the editor?"

She glanced once more at the ring her betrothed had placed on her finger before answering. "After breakfast Harry, Skeeter's not worth missing a meal over."

A/N Thanks for reading

Chapter 6

It would be fair to say that Harry's letter to the Prophet caused more than one person in the magical community to choke on their cornflakes that morning, this was especially noticeable inside Hogwarts. The headmaster may have appeared angry but that was only until your eyes caught sight of the head of Slytherin. Snape reminded the Gryffindors of Neville's cauldron during potions, right before it exploded and sprayed everyone with his latest disaster.

Ron was oblivious to most of this as the sausage, bacon and eggs currently on his plate demanded his full attention. It was only when Ginny slapped a copy of the Prophet in front of him that he got the message.

"This may give you some idea of how big a prat you've been when you need to read about your two best friends in the Prophet." She returned to sit beside Neville, allowing Ron time to read the revelations that had so shocked everyone else.

Open Letter to the Prophet, from Harry J. Potter

I am taking this unusual step because I am sick of the sniping, innuendo and outright lies printed about me and my life, I wanted to take this opportunity to set the record straight. In my entire life I have only spoken to one reporter, and then only the once. Since Miss Skeeter ignored everything I said and just wrote whatever she wanted to, anything you have ever read about me should be taken with a discerning pinch of salt. In this letter I intend only to comment on the recent events in my life, I have no intention of writing a book.

Did I miss the ball at Hogwarts? Yes. Was this a deliberate snub to the ministry and wizarding traditions? No.

For whatever reason, I was raised as a muggle and didn't know about our world until Hagrid appeared with my Hogwarts letter on my eleventh birthday. I am only now beginning to get my head around our society, and the part the Potter family should play in it. If my lack of knowledge saw me unintentionally snub anyone then I unreservedly apologise.

I did not enter the Tri-Wizard tournament but am being forced to compete because of a magically binding contract, this contract did

not cover the ball that was sprung on us at the last minute. It is one thing to keep secrets in order to surprise people, it's quite another not to take into account that those same people might have made other plans. Instead of attending the ball, I spent Christmas Day partaking in a far older, and definitely more relevant wizarding custom.

Miss Granger and I would like to take this opportunity to formally announce our betrothal. I hope you will understand that to me, meeting her family and gaining their blessing was far more important than any ball.

As to my supposed snubbing of the ministry, nothing could be further from the truth. On our return to Hogwarts, I shall be leading the Minister of Magic and the head of the DMLE down into the Chamber of Secrets. That incident has never been properly investigated by the ministry and both appear quite keen to see the basilisk I slew there.

I was hesitant to write this letter because, after a different article appeared in this paper, my betrothed received threats, howlers and booby-trapped mail that saw her needing to be treated by Madam Pomfrey. Should that situation ever be repeated, the full force of the Noble and Ancient House of Potter will be brought to bear on those stupid enough to do such a vile and cowardly thing.

It is my hope that this letter will answer some of the questions people have about me, and allow both Hermione and I to get on with our lives in peace.

The paper then went to great lengths wishing the newly betrothed couple every happiness, urging their readers to do the same. Even the thickest reader couldn't fail to spot the link between those sugar-sweet sentiments and the Prophet proclaiming loudly on the same page that they also would be reporting from Salazar Slytherin's fabled Chamber of Secrets. What the Prophet would certainly not be making public knowledge were the conditions Harry had attached to their admission to the chamber. Printing his letter, unedited by the Prophet, and under no circumstances was Rita Skeeter to be part of any team they sent to cover the story.

Even Ron Weasley was able to reach the obvious conclusion that things would never be quite the same again, he just had no idea how true those thoughts would be.

-oOoOo-

Back at the Grangers, Hermione was steeling herself for the influx of owls the story was sure to generate. An arm gently slipped around her shoulders to offer a measure of comfort. "Tonks erected an owl redirect ward around the house. Apart from the ministry, Gringotts and Hedwig, all other owls will take any post to a room at the ministry where they will be checked. Anyone trying to pull the same shit as last time will soon find aurors knocking on their door."

Harry felt her relax as soon as he started speaking, Hermione tensed up again though until they both noticed where the owl originated from. Gringotts wouldn't be sending anything that could harm you by owl, the goblins liked to look their victims in the eye before causing harm. Tonks scanned the letter anyway before proclaiming it safe to open. Dan and Emma entered the room to find the three of them discussing the note.

"What's that Harry?"

"Gringotts wrote to me, they want to make a bid for the basilisk. Apparently, since I killed it, it belongs to me."

Dan thought this was good news. "That's great, should give you a nice sum to fall back on."

Emma though could see there was something troubling the young man. "What's the problem Harry?"

"I can see this getting really messy. Ron and Ginny were down there with me and you just know Dumbledore is going to stick his big nose in too."

It was Hermione's turn to offer a comforting hug to her betrothed. "What's the real reason Harry? You didn't hesitate to sell the goblins your egg, that's probably why they contacted you."

"It will sound silly." After repeated reassurances that it wouldn't, Harry gave his real reason. "Staying here for the holidays has given

me my first taste of what family is. I'm the last surviving member of the Potters. Should anything happen to me, my family will soon be forgotten about. I would like the Potter name to once more gain recognition, and mean something more than the boy-who-lived."

No one there thought he was being silly in the slightest, especially after hearing what he wanted to do about it. Both Emma and Dan were amazed at the projected sums of money involved, even more so though at what Harry intended to do with those sums. The more they got to know the young man, the more the parents were impressed. Dan could hardly wait to show the couple off to their colleagues at the ball while Emma was becoming more convinced by the day that Harry would be her future son-in-law. She had known for a while what her daughter's feelings for Harry were, it was increasingly clear that he felt exactly the same way about Hermione. She was beginning to believe the couple might even be strong enough for their relationship to withstand Harry losing his magic.

-oOoOo-

In the headmaster's office, Severus was losing it big time. Albus had just finished speaking to a goblin by floo and had confirmed the betrothal was legally and magically binding. "The brat is hardly out the castle a week yet he manages to get betrothed. Not only that, he'll have the ministry on his side now. The article is one massive endorsement for Fudge while we'll be left to clean up any mess."

Minerva was trying to look behind what was happening here. Unlike Severus or Albus, she'd actually met the Grangers and was having trouble believing they would go along with anything like this. She could only see one reason for it. "It would appear we underestimated the pair of them, this is a move worthy of any pureblood Slytherin."

She then explained her comment before Severus took offence. "It's a typical pureblood ploy to protect the family finances and name, I would wager he's also made a will. Should Harry lose his magic, his betrothal will protect the Potter vaults while his new friendship with the minister could shield both of them from the worst of the fall out. We'll be slaughtered by the public for not protecting the boy after allowing his name to be entered."

While everyone in the office could see the truth behind that, Severus had an even more worrying thought. "Albus, do you think he knows that he can claim the carcass, or just how valuable it is?" These fears weren't associated by financial greed, Severus was far more concerned about the possibility of all those incredibly rare potions ingredients being whisked away from right under his nose.

"I'm sure we can persuade the lad to donate it to the school Severus, possibly throw in a finder's fee to keep the press happy." Albus was already thinking of including the youngest Weasleys in the finder's fee, anything that placated Molly Weasley toward the boy was something worth doing. In the long run, he needed the lad friendly with the family of redheads and couldn't let a mere howler ruin all that groundwork.

Minerva was about to voice her opinion that she didn't think there was a hope in hell of Mr Potter donating anything to the school he was planning on leaving, before deciding to hold her tongue on the matter. Albus never listened to her where Harry Potter was concerned and she couldn't see this time being any different. The headmaster was so sure of his ability to turn any situation to his advantage that he was ignoring the obvious. Severus was so desperate to get his hands on those rare potions ingredients, he was ready to believe the moon was made of cheese if he had to. She intended to ensure she had a front row seat to see if she was right, and Albus was mistaken, again.

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There were tears in Crawley as they got ready to return to Hogwarts with Madam Bones. Even Tonks had to wipe the corner of her eyes. Then again, the young auror knew what the new couple were going to face over the coming months.

Emma currently had a tight hold of both of them and clearly didn't want to let go, it took her husband's intervention before she relinquished her death grip. "C'mon Emma, I want to say goodbye too. We'll be seeing them again shortly." Dan was well aware of what was wrong with his wife. If things went really badly, they might never again see the young man who'd won his way into both their hearts. Worst case scenario, the entire family might be magically forced to forget all about Harry Potter.

When the portkey took them away, a now sobbing Emma rushed into her husband's waiting arms. "You know they'll look out for each other, they've been doing it for years. Now they've got Tonks and Dobby watching their backs too. The little guy will be popping by every night to let us know how they are. This is more than we've ever had before."

Emma struggled to speak through her crying, it took a few minutes and many attempts before Dan understood what she was trying to say. "We now know just how much danger they are in, sometimes ignorance really is bliss."

"You don't believe that any more than I do. We've just spent the last few weeks watching Hermione be the happiest she's been since our daughter learned to read, none of them will give that up lightly. Anyone trying to interfere is going to have a battle on their hands."

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The group of four entered Hogwarts and almost walked right into a battle. There were at least a dozen goblins waiting just inside the entrance hall and no amount of shouting from the potions professor could get them to move. An obviously enraged Snape rounded on Harry the instant he spotted him entering the castle. "Potter, you arrogant brat. Who do you think you are to ..."

Severus was cut off in mid rant by a wand digging into his chest before he could get his hands on Harry.

"I don't know how much things have changed in Hogwarts since I left but let me explain something to you professor. I'm tasked with protecting Mr Potter here, you attempting to attack him will see me use whatever force necessary. This is your one and only warning."

The dulcet tones of Albus Dumbledore attempted to calm the situation. "Amelia, could you please tell your auror behaviour like this cannot be tolerated inside a school."

His clearly patronising stance had the opposite effect on the head of the DMLE. "My auror has behaved exactly as her current remit demands. She will protect her charge from any attacks, be they verbal, physical or magical. That she has to do so against a professor, in front of his headmaster, the minister of magic and half

the students of Hogwarts has me thinking the ministry should be looking into more than just the chamber of secrets."

The last thing Fudge wanted was a fight between Amelia and Albus in front of the press, he attempted to play peacemaker. "Perhaps if Mr Potter could explain what is happening here, we all might have a better understanding of the situation?"

"Oh what's happening here is nothing unusual. Prince Potter here thinks he deserves special treatment. The ministry pandering to him by assigning an auror guard will make his head swell even more."

Harry was quick to answer Snape's allegations. "I have to agree that this situation is not unusual minister. Professor Snape has none of the facts and bases all his decisions concerning me on his hatred of my father, a man who's been dead for over thirteen years. And also, as usual, my head of house and the headmaster are just standing there doing nothing about it."

Also as per usual, Albus was trying to gain control of the situation. "Mr Potter, these goblins are under the impression that you sold them the right to remove the basilisk from the chamber?"

"That is because I did. I killed it therefore I get to claim it, that is the law of the land?"

Dumbledore was using his speaking to backward child voice. "Yes but Harry my boy, we must take certain other things into consideration."

Hermione had a tight hold on Harry's arm, helping him keep hold of his temper. His answer though left no one in any doubt what he thought of Dumbledore's latest attempt at manipulation. "I am not your boy, there is no we and the deal is already done."

One of the goblins handed Harry two scrolls, Harry then quickly handed the first of them to Amelia. "Madam Bones, it is my understanding that protective vests are not currently equipment that your aurors receive. Tonks also told me that the only substance that offers better protection than dragon hide is that of a basilisk. This is a gift of all the hide off the creature in the chamber, you should get dozens of vests from it."

Amelia was flabbergasted and could only nod in thanks, Harry had made his way over to Cornelius before she could get her voice to work once more.

"Minister, I understand that the single largest charitable donation St Mungo's has ever received came from Lucius Malfoy. As a Potter, I can't let that stand unchallenged. Apart from the hide, the rest of the Basilisk will be sold by the goblins, with the proceeds going to St Mungo's. The goblins will of course take a fee for this but have roughly estimated the gold generated should be larger than the Malfoy gift by about a factor of ten. I would like to make this donation in the name of my mother, Lily Potter."

Cornelius was a politician first and foremost, he graciously accepted this wonderful gift as the cameras flashed. This simple act ended anyone else's claim on the creature. Anyone attempting to take money away from a hospital or the aurors would be publically vilified.

Minerva had a tear in her eye at what the young man had just done to honour his mother. That he had also cut Albus and Severus off at the knees was not missed either by the head of Gryffindor. In one fell swoop Harry had gained two of the most powerful Allies the ministry had to offer, while exposing Hogwarts for the farce it was rapidly becoming. In a rare moment of clarity, Minerva thought early retirement might soon be upon her. It was starting to feel as if only whether her retirement was voluntary or not still hung in the balance. If Albus didn't get his head out his arse soon, the three of them would be lucky still to be working at Hogwarts come summer.

The large group made their way to Myrtle's bathroom, with most of the students following on behind. They would be left standing in the corridor but there wasn't much else happening in Hogwarts at the moment

Harry removed his robe to reveal the oldest clothes he owned under it. "There is a thousand years worth of crap down here, the place is filthy. I did warn Madam Bones and the minister, I figured the press was used to delving through dirt."

This got a laugh though the press contingent didn't see the funny side, the three professors who were there also looked incapable of laughter at the moment. Snape in particular appeared as if his face had frozen in a permanent scowl. Both Gryffindor students present

thought this was a big improvement than his trademark sneer. They also now noticed a figure in nondescript grey robes. As no one else was paying any attention to this figure, they were left to assume he was the unspeakable that Madam Bones wanted to see inside the chamber.

Harry using parseltongue when opening the sink had a few of the reporters jumping back in horror, the Prophet had apparently sent everyone who could hold a quill or point a camera. Harry didn't care, quickly jumping down the chute before anyone said another word. Hermione and Tonks were also dressed in old clothes under their robes and soon right behind him.

Cornelius took one look at the massive hole in the floor and didn't want to jump. With the press there though, there was no other option for the minister. "Now I see the need for the old clothes." He hung his robes and green bowler on a stand Amelia had created before jumping in. Cornelius was quite proud he managed not to scream all the way down. His two auror guards and Amelia followed his actions and were hot on his heels.

The goblin contingent shot down the hole as if born to it, leaving the press and the three Hogwarts professors all looking at each other. "I want to at least see the beast." With that, Severus was off, Albus and Minerva decided to follow.

The photographers were wrapping their equipment in transfigured robes as the press brought up the rear.

Down below Harry had cast a cushioning charm on the floor before Hermione arrived, the two then set about lighting the torches while Tonks cast scourgify on them to remove the worst of the crap.

Dumbledore attempted to save some face by claiming the shed basilisk skin they found down there. Most knew the shed skin was pretty worthless though so it was a fairly hollow victory for the headmaster. Snape was almost in tears at this development. The skin had just given him some idea of the amount of wonderful potions ingredients that were being snatched away.

As the goblins were busy clearing the collapsed roof, Tonks quietly approached Amelia. "Boss, I was scanning around us when the spell

tells me there's one more person down here than I can currently count."

Amelia had her own wand out and the spell was telling her the same. A quick signal to the other two aurors and they started to sweep the tunnel. A few stunners later and two reporters were on the floor. "Stay calm everyone, we all see two people lying there but our scans are telling us there are three. We've stunned them until we get to the bottom of this."

They split the two people up until they discovered who was responsible for the reading. It was Hermione who made a suggestion. "Could there be an animagus down here? Peter Pettigrew can change into a rat."

Amelia cast the animagus reversal spell and the stunned reporter was now lying on an equally stunned Rita Skeeter.

Harry and Hermione made no attempt to hide their smiles as a jubilant Tonks re-stunned Rita and cast restraints on her. Amelia was busy questioning the rest of the Prophet crew, all of whom swore they didn't know Skeeter had hitched a ride. While this was going on, the supposed unspeakable had a very quiet word with the two students.

"Very well done Miss Granger. It's your ability to think outside the box, along with your academic scores, that has my department very interested in you. Don't look so surprised, you think we hand time-turners out to just any third year students?"

This saw her blushing and Harry administering a congratulatory hug, the unspeakable wasn't quite finished though. "We are also very interested in you Mr Potter. You have the quite unique ability of not knowing the box exists. Some may call it rule breaking, we tend to refer to that trait as showing inquisitiveness and initiative. You both possess in abundance the particular qualities we look for, your move to nullify Dumbledore earlier was brilliantly planned and flawlessly executed. I would also like to offer my congratulations on your betrothal."

As Amelia looked to be finished chewing out the press, the unspeakable appeared to almost fade into the background. The

goblins now had the cave in cleared as the party crunched its way forward, the brittle bones of dead animals breaking underfoot.

When Harry once more used parseltongue to open the large circular door, the smell released wasn't anywhere near as bad as he expected. Harry entered the chamber proper and walked toward the dead basilisk, only to find there was no one walking beside him. The entire company had stopped dead in their tracks at first sight of the giant snake, it was a tearful Hermione who broke the spell. She raced at Harry and slammed into him, holding her betrothed tighter than she ever thought possible.

The flash of a camera capturing the moment saw about a dozen questions fired at Harry in as many seconds. He told the entire story, explaining who Tom Marvolo Riddle actually was. With the basilisk fang lying there, the black stain from the diary etched into the floor and Harry rolling up his sleeve to display the scar, even Snape couldn't refute his story.

Amelia, the unspeakable and the two aurors from the minister's protection detail began to scan the chamber for any other treasures it might contain. This group was quickly joined by Albus who was doing exactly the same. At the moment, all the headmaster had to show for his trip down here was some shed basilisk skin, friction burns and a shed load of bad publicity.

Once the press had everything they were going to get out of Harry concerning the chamber, they switched their questioning to his betrothal and relationship with Hermione. This line of enquire was quickly shut down by the couple and Tonks so the reporters latched on to the others down in the chamber, asking their reaction to what they had witnessed today. This soon had Snape in an even worse mood as his sour expression was proving magnetic to questions on how he felt about Mr Potter's heroic achievements.

A pair of goblins then approached Harry. "Mr Potter, we would like to make a request. It would be a crime to harvest such a magnificent creature without giving as many people as possible the opportunity to see it first."

"We would like to place the basilisk on display inside Gringotts for a week before rendering it into profitable components."

"Well I certainly don't mind, you should really ask the minister and Madam Bones though."

Hermione, as usual, had a question. "How would you get the basilisk out of here?"

"We are used to moving large objects through tunnels Miss, there are enough of us here to get the creature outside the Hogwarts wards, then we can Portkey it to Gringotts."

Cornelius had his photo taken in front of the beast, standing beside the boy-who-lived, he jumped at the chance of more people seeing the basilisk. He had no way of knowing that his pose, shirt open at the neck and sleeves rolled up, would win him far more praise than his pinstripe robe and bowler hat ever did.

Amelia had her own plans and this dovetailed beautifully into them, she also quickly agreed. Albus wasn't even asked which just gave his already battered ego a final kick in the scrotum. When the goblins started the beast moving, everyone there felt a shiver race up their back as they got a small clue to what Harry had faced.

Harry was quite disappointed, Tonks had two brooms shrunk in her bag to get them back out of there. Madam Bones was sure to have made the same provision for her and the minister. He was quietly hopping at least the press would be stuck down below, Snape trapped in the chamber would be a dream come true.

Unfortunately for that dream, the goblins helped everyone out before they began to stuff the basilisk into the chute.

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There was quite a crowd hanging about outside the toilet, they surged forward en masse as the door opened. When faced with the sight of a giant basilisk, screams rang out as they scattered in every direction possible.

Once people began noticing that the basilisk was dead, and accompanied by goblins and wizards, there were students coming out the stonework to see this once in a lifetime sight.

The students from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons were also gaping at the giant basilisk so very few people noticed Amelia pulling Albus and Minerva to one side, a raging Snape had departed for his dungeons at the first opportunity.

"I find it unbelievable that this creature was roaming the school and you did nothing. How could you not know something of this size was causing havoc in the castle?"

Neither the headmaster nor his deputy had an answer that satisfied Amelia so she informed them of her decision. "I intend to hold a public enquiry into the whole basilisk fiasco. The wizarding community needs to know their children are safe when they send them to Hogwarts. At the moment, your often quoted 'Hogwarts is the safest place in Britain' just doesn't hold water."

She stopped Albus' excuses before he could generate a head of steam. "There will be an enquiry with the panel being headed by me, and consist mainly of people who have the best interest of Hogwarts at heart. This is not your school to do with as you please but a place where the next generation of witches and wizards learn how to take their place in our society. Sometimes I think you both forget that." Amelia walked away, having achieved what she came for and also having ruined Dumbledore's New Year too. Add to that, the Skeeter bitch would be spending time in Azkaban and the head of the DMLE just had a very good day. Amelia intended to spend some time with Susan before heading back to the ministry.

The goblins took the basilisk outside Hogwarts and then gave anyone who wanted the opportunity to have their photograph taken standing beside it, Colin Creevey found himself suddenly becoming very popular for the first time since the boy set foot inside Hogwarts.

Harry and Hermione took advantage of the castle emptying to gawk at the basilisk, they were able to make their way to Harry's new quarters without meeting anyone. Tonks set the password on the portrait of two old wizards playing chess and led them into a large sitting room that had its own fireplace. No sooner had they entered than the fire burst into life and a tray of tea and biscuits appeared on the small table in front of the comfortable looking sofa.

"It looks like Dobby is determined to look after you here too Harry." When Tonks took their trunks out her bag and un-shrunk them, all

three disappeared at once. "Yip, Dobby is certainly on his game today."

"I just hope he remembers that I'm not staying here."

"Why Hermione, does that mean you don't want your things put in Harry's room?" Watching as the couple attempted to see who could blush the brightest would never get old for Tonks, she just couldn't help teasing them. A quick look around the suite of rooms met with all their approval, the large work table in the corner was all the encouragement Hermione needed to spend most of her free time here.

Both students knew Hogwarts would be crazy for what was left of the day so were quite happy to be holed up in their snug retreat, after they all took the time to shower that is.

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It was just before curfew when Hermione slipped through the portrait hole into the Gryffindor common room, only to find a reception committee waiting on her. The barrage of questions that greeted her arrival was like a physical force and saw Hermione hold her hands out in front of her.

"Wow, glad to see you missed me. One at a time please but I warn you, it's been a long day and I'm ready for my bed."

Another barrage followed and saw Hermione shake her head. "Ok guys, here's the deal. I'll tell you what's going on and then I'm heading up to my dorm. Because of all the dangerous crap Harry's had to put up with at Hogwarts, he now has an auror guard. As Tonks is female, she obviously couldn't sleep in the forth year's boys dorm."

Dean was quick with a quip. "Aw Hermione, why not? We wouldn't mind."

"Well Harry told her how loud Ron and Neville snore, so she said no chance. Anyway, Harry now has his own quarters, with a room for his auror guard. Now I need my sleep before meeting my betrothed for breakfast. Goodnight."

Hermione headed up the stairs, with Parvati and Lavender right behind her. They played twenty questions all the way to their dorm, though didn't like the fact they were getting very few answers. Hermione smiled as she realized Dobby had unpacked her trunk and began to get ready for bed, Lavender's rather obvious change of tactic also put a smile on her face.

"Oh Hermione, it's such a pity you missed the ball, it was wonderful. The band was fantastic and we danced until midnight."

Neither of her roommates had noticed the large picture in the silver frame Dobby had placed by Hermione's bedside, that was until the girl herself gazed toward it and spoke quietly. "At midnight I was in Harry's arms and we welcomed in the New Year with a wonderful kiss. The orchestra then resumed playing while we danced for another two hours, it was magical. I also got to dance with my dad while Harry had my mother twirling around the floor. They both love him and I've just had the best time ever. Sorry Lavender, but I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

Both girls now had their eyes glued to the picture too, Hermione looked amazing in her periwinkle ball gown but an even bigger surprise was Harry. Neither witch had ever seen a tux before but both instantly were in complete agreement, Harry Potter was bloody drool-worthy in one. Hermione Granger was a lucky witch.

A/N Thanks for reading

Chapter 7

Hermione was up, showered and dressed before her two dorm mates had stirred, the common room was also empty this early as she headed for Harry's rooms. There she found her betrothed not only awake, but sitting sipping tea with Tonks. By the time he'd kissed her in greeting, there was another cup on the table for her.

"How did it go last night?"

"Oh, about how we expected. I'm sure we'll be the main subject of gossip this morning but then again, what else's new. At least the basilisk should shut the doubters up."

Harry groaned at Hermione's answer, he had actually hoped they were wrong. "Does anyone else fancy having Dobby serve all our meals in here today?"

Tonks was trying not to chuckle at their obvious discomfort. She didn't know many other famous people but was willing to bet none of them hated their fame as much as Harry did. "The longer we leave this, the worse it's going to get. Finish your tea and then we'll all traipse down to the great hall for breakfast. You're as well to get all the gawking out of the way today before classes start tomorrow."

Hermione had to fill the auror in on a vital piece of information she was missing. "They will still gawk tomorrow Tonks, and the next bloody day too. For one reason or another, they've been gawking at my Harry since he set foot in the castle."

Harry let out a sigh, knowing both of them were right. "If we hole up in here, they will just think we have something to hide. Merlin only knows what the rumour mill would come up with then. I would probably be the next dark lord, with you two as my dark ladies, by the weekend."

This earned him a gentle cuff round the ear from Tonks. "In your dreams Potter."

"Hey, I thought you were supposed to protect me?"

"Not even in your dreams. You even think of taking another lady and you'll need Tonks to protect you, from me!"

Hermione couldn't maintain the stern look she was going for and soon the three of them were laughing. They were now ready to face the day.

Harry though was faced with the unusual sight of Cedric Diggory seeking him out before he made it to the great hall. "Can I have a word Harry, in private?"

Cedric obviously didn't want the two witches to hear what he had to say, Harry though had to disappoint him. "Sorry Cedric, nothing against you but Auror Tonks here won't leave me alone with anyone but Hermione. Even then, only for a few minutes."

Harry thought it would be best to play the current situation off with a few jokes, and both witches had agreed to see the funny side of this. Thankfully, so did Cedric.

"Well then Harry, I'd like to thank you for your quiet word about the first task and am offering you the same help for the second. Have you solved your egg yet?"

"No worries Cedric, I've had that egg beaten for ages."

Cedric went away quite happy at that news while Hermione and Tonks were trying to contain their laughter. "What? I wasn't lying, I did beat the egg. I just never mentioned that I used a hammer to do it."

This earned him a kiss from his betrothed, Hermione then took him by the arm as they headed off to breakfast. Both teens drawing comfort from the contact. Tonks followed on, her eyes missing nothing.

The great hall was now busy as the trio made their way toward the couple's usual spot at the Gryffindor table where Harry found himself bracketed by Hermione and Tonks. They were prepared for a lot of questions being shouted at them, and could have handled that. The silence their presence caused was creeping both the teens out. They were actually relieved when Dean broke the awkwardness.

"Harry Potter, I have a bone to pick with you. How could you let Ron and Neville's snoring deprive Seamus and me of this lovely young

witch's company? We could easily have made room for her in our dorm, have you seen the size of my bed?"

Tonks had no intention of letting that remark pass. In a matter of seconds, her features had transformed into a passable copy of McGonagall's. "Oh now there's an offer I can't refuse. I might just stop by tonight sonny and cuddle in."

Hearing a sultry voice emanating from McGonagall's features crept more than Dean out. When Tonks suggestively winked at the young Gryffindor, his courage departed for the hills on a Firebolt. Dean shot to his feet and attempted to back away. Unfortunately he'd forgotten about the bench he had been sitting on mere moments ago. He tumbled right back with his legs in the air. By the time Dean had regained his feet, the beautiful pink haired auror was casually sitting eating her breakfast while the rest of Gryffindor were laughing their arses off at him. Dean though wasn't Ron and could definitely see the funny side, he just joined in the laughter. "Oh this year is going to be great."

Releasing the tension had also opened the floodgates as the expected questions now poured over them, it was good to be back.

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They took Tonks to the unused classroom they had been using for training and she instantly approved. After discovering what they had been working on, she asked for a demonstration to get some idea of their abilities. The auror had to admit, these two were way ahead of where she was at the same age. There were some definite areas that needed tweaking though so she gave them the benefit of her training and experience. "What you're working on here is great and probably puts you well ahead of your peers."

Both teens were pleased to hear that though could sense the 'but' coming, they weren't disappointed.

"The problem I see is that your training is all focused on one on one duels, that's fine up to a point. We all know that when our Harry here gets into trouble, all hell breaks loose and there's rarely a referee to control the action. What I want to do is teach you how to fight."

Hermione didn't understand what the auror was getting at. "I thought that's what we were doing, what's the difference?"

By way of an answer, Tonks wand shot into her hand and she stunned Hermione. The auror swung around to do the same to Harry when her world went black. She regained consciousness to find her head was pounding and there were now two wands covering her. "Merlin's beard Harry, I've never seen anyone with reactions like that. You're faster than me and I was top of my auror class."

Harry though was not in the mood to listen, or forgive. "What the hell was that all about?"

"I was attempting to demonstrate the difference between a duel and a fight, and got my arse handed to me. Help me up a minute, you've got my wand." As Harry was helping Tonks up, her hand slipped down to her boot and came up empty.

"Looking for this?" Hermione had her wand trained on the auror while twiddling Tonks' spare wand in her other hand. The wide smile that greeted this revelation left both of them confused.

"Just what I thought, a couple of quick learners. A fight won't always be one to one and you certainly won't be counted into it. When you put someone down, make sure they're harmless before letting them back up. Always remember the golden rule, there are no rules. The only unfair advantage is the one the other guys have. Do you get it now?"

Tonks barely had time to groan as a wicked smile played on Hermione's lips, right before she stunned her.

They had eaten lunch in Harry's rooms, rather than face the great hall again. Things had been getting back to normal at breakfast until the Daily Prophet was delivered and silence once more broke over the hall. The three had left at that point.

One thing that'd had pleased them when they later read the paper, Rita Skeeter had been charged. Tonks assured them the reporter had far too many enemies inside the ministry to escape Azkaban. Being an unregistered animagus was bad enough, using that ability to snoop on the wrong people meant she was going down hard.

The knock at the portrait surprised them and Tonks went to see who was calling, she returned with Ron in tow. "Eh, hi guys. I just called to say congratulations on the betrothal, and to return Harry's dress robes."

This was a shock to the pair. They had tried to predict and prepare for how certain people would react on their return to the castle, neither of them had expected this type of approach from Ron. Harry was first to recover and offered their friend a seat, while trying to keep the conversation going. "Thanks Ron, we really appreciate that. How was the ball? Who did you ask?"

Ron was now that particular shade of red that the Weasley family appeared to have the patent for. "You mean you haven't heard? I was sure someone would have told you by now. Parvati and Lavender at least."

"Sorry Ron, Harry's been keeping a low profile while those two were far too busy trying to get information out of me last night, they never mentioned you at all so it can't be that bad surely?"

"Oh just probably the worst night of my life, and with some of the stuff we've faced that's really saying something."

"Ok, now you've got to tell us. Who did you ask?"

Ron knew when Hermione was in this mood there was no denying her thirst for information. It wasn't as if it was a secret though, the entire bloody castle knew. "Well I asked Cho Chang..."

Harry interrupted right away. "Why did you ask Cho, didn't you know she was going out with Cedric?"

"Well she's hot and plays quidditch, so I thought we would at least have something to talk about."

Both Harry and Hermione were surprised at Ron even thinking that far ahead.

"Anyway, she told me she was going out with Diggory but her friend still didn't have a date. Turned out there were quite a few girls holding out because they thought a certain fourth champion would have needed a partner for the ball."

Harry had his arm around Hermione and kissed her cheek. "Oh I had a partner for the ball, the most beautiful girl there."

Ron gave an involuntary grimace at the kiss before thinking of something. "Does that mean you had to buy new dress robes?"

"It was a muggle ball Ron, I had to wear a tux. I'll show you the pictures sometime. So you went to the ball with a friend of Cho's?"

"Yeah, Marietta, very nice. She absolutely hates my guts now."

"Oh Ron, I'm sure it couldn't be that bad?"

Ron couldn't even look at Hermione as he answered, he suddenly found something riveting on the floor to stare at. "I spent the afternoon drinking firewhisky and then threw up all over her at the dinner. It really was that bad, and then it got worse."

Hermione couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "How the bloody hell could it get worse than that?"

Ron again kept his eyes down as he answered. They would hear about it soon enough anyway, it was better that they heard it from him. "McGonagall dragged me away and put me onto my bed, I woke up later and went down to the common room, Neville and Ginny were there kissing..."

Ron didn't really have to say anymore, both Harry and Hermione could make an accurate guess to what followed his discovery.

"Just how bad did it get?" Harry was almost afraid to hear the answer.

"Oh, you know me. There was shouting, punches were thrown and then the wands came out. The big debate in the house is whether McGonagall was angrier that night with you standing up to her or am I the new record holder. I don't really know what the final decision was since no one in the house is talking to me. I'm certainly the new record holder for detentions, and howlers. Mum had sent one because of the drinking before she heard about me getting into a fight. I hope you two had a good Christmas because mine was really crap."

It was easy to see he was hurting so Hermione tried to help. "Do you have a problem with Ginny dating, or is it something about Neville?"

"I hadn't really thought about that, I just saw my little sister kissing a boy and went nuts."

Harry also tried to help. "Would you rather it was Seamus or Dean? What about Draco?"

This saw a shudder run through Ron. "Well that answers Hermione's question. If not Harry, then I reckon Neville would be the best of the bunch. At least we know he would never treat Ginny the way Dean talks about some of his girlfriends."

Hermione understood what Ron meant so didn't get upset about that comment. Next to Harry, Neville was probably the biggest gentleman in Gryffindor. "Ron, Ginny isn't a little girl anymore. You do understand that by standing so firmly against this, you will just push her more into Neville's arms. Harry, that Malfoy remark was uncalled for. Ginny has far better taste than that."

Ron was shaking his head though. "No Hermione, that was exactly what I needed to see this situation isn't nearly as bad as I'm making it. I also think you're right about pushing them together but I haven't a clue what to do next."

"What did the twins do about it?"

"Oh they had a quiet word in his ear about what would happen if he ever hurt Ginny."

Hermione was now smiling at Ron as she led him to the answer. "And what was Ginny's reaction to that?"

It was easy to read Ron's face as the revelation finally dawned on him. "She didn't seem to mind. That's what I should have done in the first place, not go charging in like an idiot with a hangover. I was an idiot with a hangover. How do I fix this?"

"The only thing I see having any chance of helping is an apology, to both of them. Even then it might take some time before they forgive you."

Harry got up and headed into his room, returning with a brightly coloured tin. "We all know what a sweet tooth Ginny has, this might help things along. It's a muggle sweet called Turkish Delight and it's for Ginny, I better not find out you opened it and ate half." The last bit was said only partly in jest. If Ron opened the tin, he would eat the lot.

The young wizard in question was studying the beautifully decorated hexagonal tin that said Harrods on the front while trying to figure out what to say next. "Thanks Harry, and sorry I've been such a prat this year. I know things will be different now with you two being betrothed but I hope we can still be friends?"

By way of an answer he got a hug from Hermione and a slap on the back from Harry. "I'll go and give this to her now, and apologise too."

"Wouldn't you be better waiting until after dinner?"

"Naw, got detention with McGonagall right after dinner. Every night until she tells me otherwise. I've been eating most of my meals down in the kitchen but, if this works, I might see you at breakfast?"

After receiving a couple of nods in answer, he headed off to find Ginny.

"That was a nice thing you did there Harry."

"Hermione I know what it's like to have the entire school against you, and Ron doesn't have my secret weapon."

"Oh and what might that be? I thought there weren't going to be any secrets between us?"

"You're my secret weapon. As long as I have you, I can cope with anything."

Since they had forgotten all about her, Tonks quietly made her way into her room. She reckoned they could do with some alone time before dinner. The Weasley situation had resolved itself far better than any of them had hoped, Tonks doubted if the rest of the potential conflicts would go as well.

-oOoOo-

They sat down to dinner and found Ginny and Neville seated across from them. "Thanks guys for whatever you said to Ron, and also for the sweets. They looked too good to eat, until I tasted one."

Neville agreed with his girlfriend. "You two aren't back twenty four hours yet there is a big improvement in Ron's behaviour, makes me wonder why he ever argues with you? I can't remember a time he was actually right."

"We can't take all the credit. Ron did most of it himself, once Hermione gave him a gentle nudge."

"I've heard of Hermione's gentle nudges, did she hit him as hard as she slapped Malfoy? Speaking of that prat, he's heading over here."

Neither Harry nor Hermione bothered to turn around. This confrontation was a certainty and they had a stratagem in place to deal with it.

"So scarhead, front page picture with the minister and then you go and ruin all that good work by getting betrothed to the mudblood."

"Cousin, you have just insulted the betrothed of a head of a Noble and Ancient Family. I think you should write home to Uncle Lucy and he'll tell you why that's such a bad idea."

"How dare you insinuate you're related to me, my father will be contacting the ministry over this."

"Your mother and my mother are sisters, therefore we are first cousins. I joined the auror corps to try and balance off against the evil side of the family, I'm taking no responsibility for the stupid members though."

Draco now realised who she was. "You are no relation of mine, your mother was cast out the Black family because she married a mudblood. Fair punishment and good riddance I say."

The disturbance had of course drawn the attention of Snape. "You causing trouble already Potter?"

"Actually professor, I was just having a family discussion with my little cousin Dracie here. Mr Potter hasn't said a word."

"Never call me that, you are no relation of mine. I will also never set foot in any part of a hospital named after a mudblood."

This was way over any line that Harry had drawn, he shot to his feet only to find Snape was quicker.

"Detention Malfoy, with me every night this week and your Hogsmead privileges for next weekend have just been revoked." The fury on Snape's face was there for all to see. Harry nodded his acceptance of the decision and sat back down, Draco though had more to say.

"What? You can't do that."

"I can and I just did. The next words out of your mouth better be 'yes professor' otherwise you will be vying with Weasley for the most detentions in fourth year."

Draco managed to say it with as much sarcasm as he thought he could get away with before heading out the hall, all thought of food forgotten. Snape strode purposely toward the staff table leaving a bunch of bemused Gryffindor's behind.

It was Ginny who asked the obvious question, "What the hell was that all about?" Unfortunately, no one had an answer. No one was looking forward to potions class this week now, not that any Gryffindor ever did anyway.

Harry was mulling something over in his mind and would need to have a quick chat with Dobby tonight. The little guy was staying out of sight but keeping them in touch with everyone. Hermione intended to send Hedwig with a letter to her parents every week but this was mainly just to avoid suspicion, Dobby handled most of the communications between them now.

Harry had one more thing to accomplish before that though and, when he saw the person moving, he headed to intercept. He caught up with them just outside the great hall. "Susan, can I have a few words please? Hannah's more than welcome to stay too if she wants."

This saw the girl relax, it wasn't every day Harry Potter ran after you and she felt more comfortable with her friend beside her.

"I wanted to say thanks for letting your aunt know what was going on. I don't know if she told you but Dumbledore was waiting at Kings Cross to bring me back to Hogwarts. If she hadn't been there, well let's just say I'm glad she was."

Hermione removed their planned gifts for the girl from her bag. Susan was delighted with the tin of Turkish Delight but overwhelmed by the gold lightning bolt pendant, and that was before Harry told her what its function was.

"This is charmed to help you throw off the Imperius curse. It deflects most of the curse's power away and makes it easier for your will to overrule the commands being given. Hermione and I both saw how determined, and then disappointed you were when Professor Moody cast it on us in his defence class. Hermione has a necklace that does the same."

"Harry, thank you so much. Does Aunt Amelia know about these things? I can imagine she would want them for her aurors."

Tonks actually giggled at how uncomfortable Harry was with that comment and decided to help out. "Your aunt knows all about protection jewelry Susan. What this shining knight here isn't telling you is how much these things cost, the auror department simply can't afford them."

The now embarrassed young witch attempted to return the necklace. "Harry, I can't possibly accept this."

Hermione then attempted to reassure Susan it really was ok. "Without you sending that owl to your aunt, I wouldn't have got to spend my holiday with Harry. My parents wouldn't have been able to fall in love with him and sign the betrothal contract. That necklace really is only a small token of what you did for us. If you ever need anything, you only have to ask."

With his betrothed now saying that she should accept the gift, Susan relented and Hannah fastened it around her neck. "I really can't thank you enough for this. There are so many horror stories of what

that curse did in the last war, even the thought of anyone using it to control my actions makes me want to puke."

Hermione actually gave the girl a comforting hug. "I know exactly what you mean and we can't all be Harry Potter, able to shrug the Imperius off."

"I just refuse to let anyone control me, I've had enough of that in my life. Hermione's right though, House Potter still considers itself in your debt and my door will always be open to you."

Susan gave a shy smile at this and nodded to Harry, they started making their way back to their respective dorms. Hermione headed for Harry's rooms so they could say goodnight in private before Harry walked her back to the fat lady's portrait. Classes started again tomorrow and who knew what would happen then.

-oOoOo-

Hermione was once again up early and heading for Harry's room, trying not to be self conscious about her new robes. Harry spotted this at once and held her tight.

"I thought we agreed love that we would beat the purebloods at their own game? This gives you protection too."

"I know Harry, and I'm proud to wear the Potter crest on my robes. It's just people's reactions to it that I'm worried about."

"We've read all we could find on this and probably know more about it than Malfoy, we'll be fine."

Tonks had the final word on the matter. "Besides, I'm here to make sure that you are."

When Ron sat across from them for breakfast the Gryffindors sensed a change in the wind, especially when Neville and Ginny then took the seats beside the house pariah. A garbled 'Nice robes guys' from Ron while attacking bacon and eggs was the only comment on them at the table. Things though proved a lot more interesting when the post arrived and Tonks got an owl from Gringotts.

The auror read it twice, then read it again before erecting a privacy ward around the three of them. "Would you care to explain how I'm suddenly back in the Black family Harry? Not only am I back, I've been appointed regent until you turn seventeen or Sirius gets his freedom."

"I may have mentioned one or two things to Sirius, he must have used Dobby to arrange it with Gringotts."

Tonks had a strange look in her eyes. "This means I'm getting paid twice for looking out for you."

"Surely that's a good thing? I hope you don't mind me going behind your back and arranging this? Fair's fair after all, you did it to me first."

She just growled back. "We'll talk about this later."

Tonks had no sooner dispelled the silencing ward when they heard the shout from across the hall, everyone heard Malfoy's shout.

"Potter, this is your fault. I know you had a hand in this." He rushed over with another Gringotts letter in his hand, a letter that obviously didn't contain good news.

"My mother has been cast out the Black family, disinheriting me too! This is your doing."

"On what are you basing these wild allegations Malfoy?"

"We argued over this yesterday, and today I get this? Of course you had something to do with this. I just can't figure out how you did it with that criminal Black on the run?"

"Is this the same Sirius Black who escaped from Azkaban? Then he broke into Hogwarts and even made it out of a tower Dumbledore had sealed him in. When you look at it like that, he really could be anywhere and do anything. Personally I agree with his decision. Marrying a Malfoy is a lot worse than marrying a muggleborn so your mother deserves to be cast out the family. Good riddance I say. Did you know Tonks and her mother have been reinstated?"

Draco was glaring at his 'cousin' and appeared ready to explode before Tonks cold voice returned a glimmer of sense to the raging Slytherin. "I can guarantee it would be a serious mistake to draw your wand on an auror, especially this one. I advise you to return to your house table and think this over. I would also advise you to ask your father the question I posed yesterday when you write to him whining about the unfairness of it all."

Albus had been watching on in dismay. He had expected the boy being betrothed, having his own quarters and an auror guard to breed resentment within Gryffindor. At the very least he expected the youngest Weasley boy's jealousy to increase the rift between them. Instead Harry was proving to be the glue that was once more binding the house closer. It had also quickly come to the headmaster's attention the amazingly thoughtful gift Harry had given Amelia's niece.

Even the robes had been a surprise. He was drawn back to Minerva's comment that his moves were worthy of any pureblood, clearly Harry had gotten his hands on a few books. Albus didn't like this more confident and assured version of the boy, it was time to instill some doubt in the minds of the student population.

Albus had stared at the boy over his half moon glasses long enough to attract the attention of most of the hall, it was now time. "Mr Potter, you seem singularly well informed about someone who is the most wanted criminal in Britain. One might even think you were in contact with him?"

Harry didn't flinch, answering quickly and confidently. "That Sirius escaped Azkaban and was also inside Hogwarts last year is known to everyone in the castle. Sirius Black is my godfather and innocent of all the crimes he was thrown in Azkaban for, chucked in there to rot without a trial I have to add. I have spoken with the minister and the head of the DMLE over this and told them both what I know."

Albus could see Harry was being believed here but he didn't know he wasn't finished yet. "Hermione, Ron and I also told the head of the Wizengamot this too but I think his memory might be going a bit in his old age. As to what happened here this morning, Auror Tonks was just telling me about her Gringotts letter before Malfoy as usual went off half cocked."

The sniggering at the Gryffindor table escalated into laughter at Harry's last remark and Albus was forced to admit he'd underestimated the lad. Not only had he given Potter's confidence another boost, his popularity was also on the up.

He had Cedric Diggory and Susan Bones championing his cause in Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw would weigh the evidence and make their own minds up. Gryffindor was solidly behind their golden boy while Severus giving detention to that idiot Draco sent mixed messages to the house of the cunning. He even saw Viktor Krum congratulating the couple on their betrothal.

The basilisk affair was a publicity coup of unprecedented proportions, giving Harry the backing of not only the ministry but the entire wizarding public of Britain. The same wizarding public that were queuing the length of Diagon Alley to see the creature now displayed at Gringotts.

With the ministerial enquiry looming over the basilisk incident, Albus was going to have to tread carefully here. If, as Albus suspected, the lad intended to deliberately refuse to compete in the next task, Albus would be forced to take action. Whatever the fallout from anything he had to do, Albus would just have to grin and bear it. The consequences of doing nothing would be catastrophic.

Harry Potter would have to compete in the second task, the greater good demanded it.

-oOoOo-

Amelia and her friend from the unspeakables were currently drinking port while staring at the ruined book in front of them. Just looking at the thing left the head of the DMLE feeling dirty.

"You're sure? There can be no mistakes here."

"You think I don't know that Amelia? I wish for all our sakes I was wrong."

"Harry Potter's story of facing Voldemort in his first year at Hogwarts now makes a lot more sense. How does this tie-in with the death eaters and the dark mark appearing at the world cup? Isn't he gone now his anchor is destroyed?"

It was clear her friend didn't want to say the next bit, Amelia was left wishing he hadn't. "We're assuming he made only one, Voldemort was always more ambitious than that."

She had received an owl today from an excited Susan about Harry Potter, Amelia would be thanking the young wizard next chance she got. The thought that Harry had now finished off the dark bastard three times yet it still might not be enough had her reaching for the decanter. Her hand stopped just before it reached its destination as she thought out loud.

"Dumbledore knows all this, and more I'll bet. That's why he's so fixated on Harry Potter!"

Her friend could only nod in agreement. "There is a prophecy sphere down in the hall with Harry Potter and the dark lord's name on it. The initials A.P.W.B.D. are on there also. The only way to find out what it says is to get Harry to the ministry and let him listen to it, Dumbledore already knows what it contains."

Every auror instinct Amelia had relied on over all those years in the field were now screaming at her to take action, she had no intention of ignoring them. "Harry has the second task of that bloody tournament coming up soon. After that, we'll contact him about this prophecy. He has a right to know about it, whether he does anything about it will be up to him."

She refilled their glasses as both pondered what secrets the little glass ball held. Amelia was already certain they wouldn't be beneficial to Harry Potter's health, that young wizard just couldn't seem to catch a break.

A/N Thanks for reading

Chapter 8

Tonks wondered if today was the day where she crossed the line. Not that it would stop her, she fully intended to follow her charge when he went to meet his godfather. That Harry's godfather was the most wanted man in Britain, and she was an auror, were just mere details amongst the grander scheme of things. There was no way Harry Potter was getting out of her sight.

She had been pleasantly surprised how quickly she'd been accepted by everyone in the castle, professors and students alike. The better professors had fallen on Tonks' capabilities and used her like an unpaid teaching assistant. Since she was in the class anyway, the auror was only too happy to oblige. Charms, Transfiguration, Defence and Herbology were all fun classes for her, History and Divination though were a complete waste of time while, even though she was an auror, Tonks wasn't about to go anywhere near those things Hagrid was breeding. Potions had become a futile exercise in detente, Snape hated them, they hated the potions professor but neither could avoid the other completely.

Harry had also played it quite smart by inviting his friends back to his rooms, letting them see for themselves just exactly what was going on there. She did have to do a sweep after the Weasley twins visit, discovering a few little surprises they had deliberately left behind. Tonks was still waiting on an opportunity to return said items, it had to be public though and it had to be funny. It was all a matter of timing.

At least the Malfoy situation had calmed somewhat. Tonks was sure the little git must have received a letter from home by now, she would have given a month's salary to read it, or watch while Draco did. One thing a little pureblood git like him should have known, never mess with the head of an ancient and noble family.

Doing so could lead to sanctions that could seriously hurt the Malfoy's social standing, especially after Draco and his mother were cast from the Black family. Tonks would give up another month's pay from the Black family vault to have been a fly on the Malfoy wall the morning that particular letter was delivered.

Come to think of it, she was being paid twice over and not getting out the castle to spend any of her gold. She decided that was a

good thing. At the end of this she just might lose her job, having some gold in the bank couldn't hurt.

-oOoOo-

Harry was also worried about today. Sirius may not have been there to look after him when he was growing up but his godfather seemed determined to make amends now. By signing his betrothal and appointing Tonks the Black family regent, Sirius had, knowingly or not, provided some much needed protection for both Hermione and him. He'd also provided another income for Tonks in case she lost her job over this, something Harry was very grateful for.

Now he was going to have to tell his godfather just what he was intending, not a conversation he was looking forward to. Would Sirius be disappointed with him, would he think this was a cowardly way out? Harry just didn't know Sirius well enough to make any kind of accurate guess as to how today would go. He was just glad Hermione was going to be at his side for this, Harry felt he was able to face anything with her support.

He did feel rather bad about Ron, or more so his own reaction to discovering that their friend also had his Hogsmead privileges revoked. He was relieved that an almost certain conflict had been avoided. There was no way Ron could listen in to what they would be discussing today and Harry hadn't been looking forward to telling him that they needed time alone. That idea would have been about as popular to Ron as one of Hagrid's blast ended Skrewt's.

They would just have to make sure they left some time to actually go into Hogsmead and visit Honeydukes. To return with nothing would appear suspicious, and some chocolate frogs would go a long way to easing Ron's pain at missing the outing. Their friend didn't seem to mind that Harry was once more elevated to the position as the student who had made McGonagall the angriest, it was amazing how quickly that story had flashed around the castle considering there were very few witnesses.

-oO flashback Oo-

The class were packing their books away in transfiguration when McGonagall zeroed in on Hermione. "Miss Granger, could you wait behind after class?"

When Harry's bag was packed, he very deliberately resumed his seat beside Hermione. That Tonks then took up a supportive position behind them also couldn't be missed. The rest of the class got out of there before they were caught in the wrath they could see accumulating in the Gryffindor head of house.

"Mr Potter, I don't recall asking you to stay behind? Kindly leave now, Miss Granger will soon join you at lunch."

Harry continued to sit, staring straight through the now very angry professor.

"Do you have a problem with your hearing Mr Potter? Perhaps you need a visit to Madam Pomfrey?"

"Oh my hearing is perfect professor, I'm just puzzled at what you are trying to pull here. I have to assume that the Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts would know what my ring on Hermione's finger and the Potter family crest on her robes signifies. Yet here you are, totally disregarding everything that stands for. My question is why? Do you believe we wouldn't know the laws and customs surrounding a betrothal?"

"Are you saying I can't have a word with Miss Granger because she's betrothed to you?"

Harry was now shaking his head. "Tut, tut professor, trying to bluster your way out of this? Why am I not shocked? As Miss Granger is now my betrothed, anything you want to discuss with her gets done in my presence. She is my responsibility, not yours."

Tonks thought she might as well add her two knut's worth. "Where Harry goes, I go."

McGonagall aimed her next question directly at Hermione. "And what are your thoughts on this matter Miss Granger? Do your parents even know what they signed?"

Hermione understood how she was supposed to answer this, as a demure little pureblood princess. "I am a betrothed witch, therefore I follow the rules that position entails."

Harry let Hermione answer before tearing into their head of house. "How dare you question my betrothed, or the validity of our betrothal, in front of an auror too. I could easily have you up in front of the board of governors for that. I demand an apology!"

McGonagall was grudgingly forced to give an apology, knowing full well the board would come down hard on her for this massive breach against pureblood magical custom. Harry continued to push her buttons.

"Apology accepted and, just so there can be no room for misunderstanding here, I'm informing you as our head of house that no member of the Hogwarts staff has permission to meet with my betrothed without me being there."

McGonagall was forced to watch helplessly as the three left her classroom, Harry's final comment was pitched loud enough to ensure she overheard.

"Are you sure there's nothing in Hogwarts a History about changing houses? Any of the others must be better than Gryffindor."

The three sat at lunch and endured the poisonous stares from the Head of Gryffindor, with the headmaster joining in shortly thereafter. He'd obviously now heard what happened. That they were also the recipients of death glares from the head of Slytherin house was hardly worth commenting on, that was just normality to them.

-oO end flashback Oo-

Harry desperately needed another magical adult's opinion on how his proposed plan might play out. Since this had never been done before, opinions were all they had at the moment. What was really worrying Harry was the thought of Hermione being left in the castle without him. With Tonks there to help, they were now training harder than ever. Harry understood his betrothed could take care of herself but every advantage helped. He also understood she would need the support of their housemates behind her and was really pleased the way their friends had been able to so easily accept their betrothal, neither of them expected any help from their head of house. He'd also watched on as Hermione and Tonks became quite close, their friendship helped along by being flung together due to their situation.

-oOoOo-

Hermione held Harry's hand as they walked the twisted route down from the castle to Hogsmead village. When they spied the big black dog sitting under a tree it was time for action. After making sure they weren't being observed, Harry wrapped both of them in his father's cloak while Tonks drastically changed her appearance. Now she looked to any passerby like a typical middle aged villager out walking her dog.

The cloak was struggling to cover both of them but Hermione didn't mind, any excuse to hold Harry tight was more than welcome. She was aware Harry was very nervous about this meeting, having Sirius' approval for his scheme would mean a lot to him. It was one thing to say you were prepared to lose your magic, quite another to actually have that event racing toward you. The second task was now less than six weeks away and she still hadn't been able to come up with an alternative way for them both to leave Hogwarts and Dumbledore behind.

Tonks and her had been working on this since Harry first mentioned it back before Christmas. Their main problem though was this situation was unprecedented and for the first time ever, Hermione couldn't find the solution in the pages of a book. Their betrothal and now Tonks as regent to the Black family would certainly help deal with the aftermath, none of them thought it was anywhere near enough to push through their removal from Hogwarts under Dumbledore's rule. Their ministerial support would disappear the instant they showed any indication of wanting to continue their schooling outside Britain, and that would be all the encouragement Dumbledore would need to push for regaining control of Harry.

The way Harry had been left isolated and unaware of his heritage or family history was appalling. When added to all the other things that had happened in his life, you didn't need to be an avid believer in conspiracy theories to see something was badly off here. Everything kept coming back to Dumbledore and he was just far too powerful, magically, politically and every other way they could think of for a couple of teenagers to take on.

Padfoot had led them a merry dance but, after turning a tight corner they could all now see the cave entrance the big dog was making for.

The mutt's tail had barely crossed the threshold of the cave when suddenly there was a man standing in the dog's place. Harry had the cloak whipped off and raced right into his godfather's waiting arms. Hermione stood there watching with tears in the corner of her eyes until both wizards turned toward her and opened their arms for her to join them, she didn't need a second invitation.

Tonks had one eye on the hugging trio while the other scanned the cave. She noticed the camp bed at the back with the sleeping bag and pillow, there were also two large logs that had obviously been used for sitting on since there was a campfire in the centre. There was a part of the cave wall that jutted out, forming a natural shelf. When four mugs of hot chocolate, with Dobby's signature of mallows floating on the top appeared on the shelf, Tonks got some idea of why this appeared such a well organised camp site.

Sirius was now coming toward her with his hand held out. "Last time I saw you Nymphadora, you were about six!"

She actually growled in reply. "I was nine, and don't call me that. Some parents shouldn't be allowed to name their children, just call me Tonks."

Sirius managed to stifle his laughter. "Well Tonks, I just want to thank you for looking after these two for me." They were interrupted by the arrival of a basket, a basket that had a delicious aroma wafting from it. "Harry, that elf of yours is something else. He drops by almost every night and we sit here for hours talking about his favorite subject."

No one in the cave had any doubt what, or who that subject would be. They sat on the logs around the campfire, drinking their hot chocolate and munching on the hot pies Dobby had just delivered. Harry silently promised to thank his little friend later, it was clear to see Sirius wasn't exactly 'roughing it' here. His godfather actually looked a lot better than the last time they met. A constant supply of good food, and Mr Granger's clothes, were responsible for most of that change. There also appeared to be a spark of life back in his Godfather's eyes. This was much better than the hint of madness shown there that night in the shrieking shack, his obsession with Pettigrew was perfectly understandable but certainly unhealthy.

The chat was light and conducted between mouthfuls, mainly consisting of Tonks thanking Sirius from her mother. Sirius also loved hearing about how they dealt with the Malfoy spawn, he sounded every bit as obnoxious as his utter bastard of a father.

It was Sirius who decided the preliminaries were over. "Ok you two, while I'm delighted to see you betrothed, I would like to hear the real story behind it."

Harry started, with Hermione's assistance, painting a picture of his life up until now. Sirius grew more concerned as the story progressed. With any other teens, he would have been sure they were bullshitting him. Dobby daily delivering the Prophet, especially the issue that featured the basilisk, killed those thoughts stone dead. Sirius was wondering where this was going until his godson blew every thought straight out his head.

"I had a moment that Hermione told me is called an epiphany, I saw myself lying dead at Hogwarts. This led me to see that the only way I was ever going to leave the castle was as a body with a sheet over me. Every year the incidents get more and more dangerous, and my luck can't hold out forever. One slip against that bloody dragon and I would have been a gonner for sure."

Hermione now had her arms around Harry with her head resting on his shoulder.

Sirius was quiet for a few minutes before speaking. "I can't fault the logic, nor the conclusions you've reached. I'm also convinced Dumbledore would never stand idly by as Harry Potter walked out of Hogwarts. I'm pretty certain you have a plan to deal with that, one that if your expressions are anything to go by I'm not going to like?"

Harry decided to just come right out and say it. "I can't go to Hogwarts if I don't have any magic. I intend to deliberately not take part in the second task."

Time seemed to stand still for Sirius. By no stretch of anyone's imagination could the last decade of his life be classed as comfortable, it had literally been hell on earth. At no point though would Sirius have considered giving up his magic to end his torment. That his godson was not only considering this option, but actively pursuing that course of action had him ready to weep at the life

Harry had been forced to lead. He then caught on to the fact that Harry was desperately waiting on an answer from him, Sirius' heart was breaking as he spoke to his godson.

"Last summer, you accepted the word of an escaped convict and then risked both your lives to rescue me from a dementor's kiss. I've loved you since the moment your dad placed a crying baby boy in my arms. Whether you have magic or not will make no difference to me."

This unconditional acceptance was something Harry had longed for his whole life, that he was sitting in a cave in the middle of the Scottish highlands mattered not a jot. He was soon wrapped in a hug from the person he was desperate to promote to the role of a father figure.

It took a few moments for everyone in the cave to dry their eyes and get things back on track. "Ok, now I get the need for a betrothal. While I can't see how losing your magic could fail to get you chucked out of Hogwarts, please tell me you're all working on a plan B?"

It was left to Tonks to answer. "Working on yes, got one - no. Apart from Hermione's parents, no one else knows about this. Hermione and I have been searching through every book we can get our hands on but so far come up blank. Everything we've read says an unbreakable magical contract is just that, unbreakable without facing the consequences."

Sirius desperately wanted to rant and rave about the injustices that appeared to be heaped onto his godson but reckoned that wouldn't help them here. What they needed was another way out of this. "How can Harry be entered into a magical contract by someone else? Unless that person was their parent or guardian, it shouldn't be magically binding."

Hermione had of course thought of that. "It shouldn't really be possible but then again, Harry competing in the first task might have confirmed the contract." Hermione didn't feel as silly saying the next bit as when she first thought of it. In fact, it made a lot of sense now. "There is also the possibility that Dumbledore entered your name in that goblet. Since he would be considered your magical guardian at the time, that would make it magically binding."

Harry hadn't thought of that angle but had another agenda entirely. "It doesn't really matter now. If I keep my magic then I need to stay at Hogwarts, that's something I no longer want to do. I've made my choice, I'd rather be a healthy muggle than a dead wizard."

Hermione agreed entirely with that sentiment. "And I want my boyfriend and betrothed beside me for many years to come, not to be crying over his body. I'll happily take Harry whatever way I can."

"Ok, so we need to come up with a solution that allows Harry to keep his magic yet still get out from under Dumbledore? Well, that should be easy. How long we got?"

"Less than six weeks."

"Shit! I assume that's why you're standing next to that idiot Fudge in the paper, it certainly can't hurt when the chaos begins."

"My biggest worry is being obliviated, not remembering Hermione, or you, would be far too high a price for my magic."

"Oh so I'm Miss Forgettable am I?"

"Sorry Tonks, you know I would certainly miss you too."

"Well I'll help anyway I can, even if that's just buying a muggle house for my godson to live in. No matter what happens this term, I will not have you going back to those Dursleys. Dumbledore can rant all he wants about protective wards, he's supposed to keep you safe the rest of the year and look how that's turned out."

"If you're serious, there are some rather nice houses beside ours in Crawley?"

"Of course I'm Sirius, and that's a great idea Hermione. I'll get our little friend organised for a trip to Gringotts later. Please thank your parents for me. Not only did they take Harry into your home but their kindness toward me, an escaped prisoner who they've never met, was just wonderful. Having Harry living amongst people like that is certainly something I want to encourage."

This was something that had Tonks' complete support. "They are a really nice couple Sirius, and the area is lovely too."

That was all the recommendation Sirius needed, his mind was made up. Now to the far more difficult task of what to do about this bloody tournament. He now understood it was not the tournament as such his godson was rebelling against, rather Harry was using it to get out from under the thumb of a conniving old bastard. That the lad was willing to accept such a drastic change in his life to accomplish this left Sirius ready to storm the castle and set about the said old bastard himself. What was almost as disappointing to the marauder were the actions, or inactions, of his former head of house. Dumbledore would have a plan that no one else was privy to, Snape was just a death eater who hated the name Potter but McGonagall was someone the marauder expected better from.

"Ok, so where we'll live is taken care of, now for getting these two away from Hogwarts with Harry still being a wizard. Let's hear any ideas you have, however crazy."

They talked for hours, losing all track of time until a pop alerted them they had a visitor.

"Dobby is sorry to interrupt but Harry Potter is going to be late getting back to the castle."

A quick check of watches confirmed the elf was right. "Thanks Dobby, looks like Ron's had his sweets. We'll need to get a move on."

The little elf then produced a bag that was brimming over with all sorts of confectionary. "Dobby did some shopping as Harry Potter was busy..."

The elf was cut off by his master's wide smile and thanks. "Dobby, that's brilliant. I don't know how I ever managed without you?"

It was a very happy elf who popped away to let the four say their goodbyes.

They made good time, which was just as well. Harry noticed Snape hanging about the gates to the castle, obviously hoping to catch

them returning late. He turned to share this information only to find Tonks had all her attention focused elsewhere.

Victor was standing on the deck of his ship, stripping down to a pair of skimpy swimming trunks. The muscular young wizard then strode to the stern before he unhesitatingly dived off into the extremely cold water of the Black Lake.

Harry was shivering just watching his fellow champion. "I think they must build them different in Bulgaria, you would need to be nuts to be doing that at this time of year."

A pair of arms encircled Harry from behind. "I like the way they build them here just fine. Tonks though seems to agree with you since she couldn't take her eyes off Victor, perhaps we should invite him over one night?"

Tonks wasn't going to let Hermione away with her teasing as they resumed walking back to the castle. "Actually, I was wondering if he was preparing for the second task. Fleur in a bathing costume should certainly raise a few male temperatures on a cold February morning. That's a good idea Hermione, let's invite Diggory and Delacour too! We could make it a party?"

This got Harry thinking. "Not a bad idea Tonks, except for the party bit. Cho can't stand Ron after what he did to her friend at the ball, and he couldn't be in the same room as Fleur without becoming a drooling idiot."

"Remind me again why you two are friends with him?"

Harry ignored the sarcasm against his friend and continued to think out loud. "I think we should have a Champions' dinner, where we can sit and chat about anything other than the tournament."

Hermione thought this was a wonderful idea and kissed Harry for thinking of it, unfortunately they were now in range of Snape's sneer. "A full day in Hogsmead with Potter still not enough for you Granger? Kindly refrain from any more public displays of wanton lust and learn some decorum before you put everyone off their dinner. You can also empty out your pockets so I can check for contraband that you are trying to smuggle into the castle."

The group knew this was a crock of shit. Snape would confiscate anything they had, regardless of whether it was against school rules or not. Both Harry and Hermione made no attempt to hide their smirks as they showed Snape their empty pockets.

The potion master now saw the flaw in his attempt to harass these two, the pink haired auror had a bag over her shoulder.

Tonks thought the best form of defense was to attack so waded right into battle, her wand sliding into her palm. "You can search my bag right after you show us your left forearm."

This took the wind out Snape's sails but Tonks was only getting started. "I know for a fact that there are two death eaters currently at Hogwarts, that kinda points the finger at who would put Harry's name in that goblet. How do you think that revelation would go down at the Prophet? Especially with a ministerial hearing into the basilisk going to be held soon and Dumbledore having to explain he knew about you and Karkaroff. Back off Snape and stay out of our way or I will bury you."

Snape managed to rage and go pale at the same time, quite a feat. Tonks had effectively ruined his appetite far more thoroughly than any public display of affection ever could. The trio heard a familiar voice from the shadows as they crossed the courtyard.

"Well said lass, don't give them an inch. Hit first and hit hard."

Tonks instantly had her wand trained on the scarred former auror. "Moody, I don't give anyone an inch, even you."

Watching that battered old face break into something resembling a smile was too much for the trio, they got out of there.

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The meeting in Dumbledore's office later that evening was not a pleasant one, that all three knew there were a large group of friends currently meeting in Potter's quarters only darkened the mood.

Albus was left with no option but to personally intercede in the matter, his two best forms of controlling the boy had been very

effectively neutralised. Potter was becoming far too independent and must be brought to heel. Selling this idea to Severus was never going to be a problem, Minerva though was still clinging to her morals and needed some persuasion. Their timing was now going to be tight since it would be professional and political suicide to act before the ministerial hearing but they needed the plan in place now. He needed Minerva's agreement before pushing ahead.

"You tried the direct approach Minerva, and were slapped down like some errant first year. Severus just had his wings effectively clipped by Harry's auror escort. The lad is labouring under the misconception that, should he lose his magic, all his problems will go away. Voldemort won't care whether Harry is magical or not when he kills the boy. Without the protection that Hogwarts and the wards at his home provides, the lad won't live through the summer..."

"Have you tried telling him that? You claim he's making a disastrous decision here but, on the facts he has, Harry obviously doesn't think so. If he's old enough to face that dragon, he's old enough to hear the truth. Surely it would be better to have the boy working with us?"

"Minerva, the mere fact that he would consider losing his magic as an option tells me Harry Potter is not ready to do what he must to save magical Britain. It is a purely selfish act where he is thinking of no one but himself. You even commented that his betrothal was nothing more than a means to protect his vaults from the ministry."

Severus had almost choked at the thought of Potter saving anything, far less the country. Here though was something he could support fully. "I've always said Potter is nothing more than an attention seeking brat, look at what he did with the basilisk. Not content with getting his face plastered all over the newspapers and denying the school even a share of the beast, he goes whining to Bones and now we're all under investigation. If Albus wasn't so adamant the brat needed to stay here, I would be glad to see the back of him and shouting good riddance from the tallest tower in Hogwarts."

"Severus needs time to brew the potions Minerva, we are all required to agree on this. If I were to tell him the truth, whose to say we wouldn't be reading about it in the Prophet before the week was over. I can only reiterate, Mr Potter leaving Hogwarts would be a disaster for every person in Britain whether they be magical or not."

We have to weigh any unsavory intentions against that background. Sometimes, the needs of the many far outweigh the needs of the one. It's unfortunate, but Harry Potter just happens to be the one in this case."

"Very well Albus, I don't like anything about this situation but I'll do it."

The smile that was on Albus Dumbledore's lips was one of a person who had gotten his way once again. Severus Snape on the other hand couldn't hide his glee at the thought the Potter brat was finally going to get his comeuppance.

Harry was happily chatting to Neville when a shudder ran up his back, almost as if someone was walking over his grave.

Later that night, a cave outside the village of Hogsmead held two beings that would do anything within their power to help Harry Potter. They also put plans into effect toward that end.

A/N Thanks for reading

Chapter 9

Harry came out his bedroom next morning to find Hermione and Tonks eagerly trying to sort through a mountain of books that hadn't been there when he went to bed last night. As he had just woken up, Harry felt he could be excused for asking the obvious question. "Where did this lot come from? Did you two do a midnight raid on the library?"

"Trust me Harry, you wouldn't find most of these in the Hogwarts library. Not even in the restricted section. Tonks said some of the books have the Black family crest on them."

As a cup of tea appeared on the table in front of him, Harry knew just who to ask about the book mountain mystery. "Dobby, what do you know about these books?"

The little elf appeared at once and offered an explanation. "Dobby and your godfather were talking last night, he tells Dobby there are many books in his family library that might help Harry Potter."

"So you went and got them?"

"No Harry Potter sir, Dobby is a Potter elf but his friend Winky was wanting a new family. She was very happy to bond with your godfather and join his family. Winky was able to take Dobby to the Black library and we brought all these books to help Harry Potter. There are many more left and we will bring others when you finish with those ones."

Dobby popped away and Harry immediately expected an explosion from his betrothed because Sirius had bound Winky to him. The explosion never materialised though as Hermione had her full attention on the visible results of that bonding. Personally Harry thought Dobby was doing more to promote Hermione's idea of Elfish Welfare than all her badges and hat knitting combined. He had no doubts that Sirius had about as much choice in bonding with Winky as he had with Dobby. The little guy was just wonderful at looking after his family, and it would appear he did the same for his friends. He would lay odds that Winky would now be looking after Sirius but that Dobby would still be popping by there most nights. There was certainly not a master / slave relationship and Harry was very happy about that.

"Harry, some of the stuff in here is brilliant. Some of it is absolutely brutal too."

"Hermione's right, there's a lot of stuff in here that even I've never seen before."

Harry had thought of a problem though. "What do we do with all these books? We can't leave them sitting around in case our friends see them, or someone else we don't want comes in here."

Both witches instantly recognised that could be a very real problem, these books couldn't be read by anyone outside the three of them. Tonks made a suggestion to Harry. "You could purchase a library trunk? They can be bought pre-expanded inside to hold as many books as you specify. The more books you want to store, the more expensive the trunk will be though."

Dobby was called again and, after estimating how many books the Black library contained, sent to Diagon Alley to purchase a library trunk to house their new library. They decided it would sit in Tonks' room in the hope that any casual snoopers would just assume it was nothing more than an ordinary trunk belonging to the auror. She also intended to put some serious magical protections on the trunk so that only the three of them would have access to it.

They had to practically drag Hermione down to breakfast. Having access to a private library was something of a dream come true for the self confessed bibliophile. That hidden somewhere in this precious resource might be the answer to their problem meant that Hermione was going to be spending even more time in Harry's rooms.

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When they met Cedric heading into breakfast with Cho, Harry immediately floated the idea of a champions' get together. The Hufflepuff was all for it, especially after hearing Cho was also invited.

"The only condition is that we leave all talk of the tournament at the door, it's to be an evening spent just getting to know each other as friends."

Hermione had another thought. "Since there's going to be at least four seekers there, perhaps we should add quidditch talk to that ban as well?"

Tonks couldn't hold her laughter. "Good luck with that idea Hermione. There's more chance of Harry inviting Snape."

Hermione started to giggle, destroying her image as the girl who was always so serious. Her next words shattered that illusion forever, leaving Cedric and Cho looking forward to the get together even more. "Sorry, I just got this image in my head of Snape as the after-dinner entertainment. Breaking out of a giant cake and going straight into a song and dance number. That old black magic has me in its spell..." Hermione couldn't continue with the song as she was laughing too much at the image in her head.

A now laughing Harry scooped her into his arms. "Ok, my betrothed is clearly suffering from the lack of bacon and eggs. Please excuse me while I see her breakfast needs are met."

A smiling Tonks was shaking her head and following on when Cho asked her a question. "Are those two always like that? I was under the impression they were pretty serious."

The auror was still smiling as she answered. "Only about each other, otherwise they're a lot of fun to be around. I can honestly say this is the best assignment I've ever had. That's why they came up with the idea of getting the four champions together, to dispel the misconceptions you all have about each other." They could hear the laughter coming along the corridor as Hermione was now trying to convince Harry to put her down. "I need to go, keeping these two out of trouble is a full time job."

Victor quickly agreed to come along, he also indicated he would be coming alone. Something that would ensure Tonks was teased mercilessly about when Harry and Hermione got her alone.

Fleur though was suspicious of this sudden invite, looking for an ulterior motive but finding none. It was Hermione's plea that sealed the deal. "Please come, I'll need some help when the others continually steer the conversation onto quidditch. I enjoy watching the sport, it's just the endless talk about it afterward that drives me

mad." Having a witch invite her anywhere was so unusual for Fleur that she just had to say yes.

Ron was pretty miffed at the whole idea. There was going to be a party with food, Fleur and Victor Krum yet his best friends couldn't invite him.

"Ron, it's a get together for the champions."

"Hermione's not a champion but she'll be there."

Harry tried to not let his exasperation show as Ron once more performed his very convincing portrayal of a thick git. "She's my betrothed Ron, that means we're going to get married one day. I may be the one inviting the champions but Hermione is undoubtedly the one who will organise it. What the hell do I know about having guests over? You're my friend Ron but Hermione is the person I'm going to spend the rest of my life with, you need to understand the difference."

This earned him a searing kiss from a misty eyed Hermione. Hearing Harry talk like that made her more determined than ever to get through this ordeal, whatever it took.

While her charge was otherwise engaged, Tonks took the opportunity to question a shell-shocked Ronald Weasley. "You're a pureblood Ron, what did you think their betrothal meant?"

"Betrothals are usually arranged between families as a business deal. I thought the Grangers would be delighted to get Hermione off their hands, I didn't realise that Harry loved her."

Unfortunately for Ron, half of Gryffindor were now listening in to his explanation, including the two people he was talking about. The glares heading in his direction saw Ginny take action. She grabbed her brother by the hair and dragged him to his feet. "Run Ron, and don't look back. Half a dozen times around the Black Lake might give us time to calm these two down."

One glance at the glares coming from the couple saw Ron take flight. Ginny then apologised. "Sorry guys, I didn't want you two getting into trouble for hexing the prat. It seems McGonagall is now as likely to use any excuse to give you detentions as Snape is."

Both nodded in agreement and thanks before Tonks posed another question. "I asked this already and didn't get an answer so I'll try again, why are you two friends with that prat?"

It was with a sigh Hermione answered her. "We know there is a decent person under Ron's general persona of being a complete and utter arsehole, we've all seen occasional glimpses of it. Then he goes and pulls a stunt like this and we're left asking ourselves the very same question. I think it's going to be touch and go whether Ron finally grows up before one of us kills him."

The last statement was met with some nervous laughter as not all of their friends were sure whether Hermione was joking or not. Harry's arm snaking around her to offer comfort meant that at least there wasn't going to be a murder done here today, not unless Ron did something else to annoy them.

At the staff table, twinkling blue eyes watched this latest development with great interest, Potter appeared to be very deliberately courting allies amongst his fellow champions. Albus couldn't help but think the boy could have been a great leader in the future. He had magical, political and financial power behind him as well as something gold just couldn't buy, charisma. It was such a pity that Harry Potter didn't have a future.

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"There's nothing wrong with having a toyboy Tonks, Harry's a good bit younger than me and we manage just fine."

"Guys just love a more experienced woman, Victor would be lucky to have you."

"Enough, will you two knock it off? When I need a couple of teenagers to organise my love life I'll give you a call." The auror couldn't really keep the humour out of her voice, these two needed this distraction to take their minds off the fast approaching second task. Hermione's nose had only left the books to attend classes and kiss Harry, they needed a break. With Dobby quietly handling all the catering tonight, all that was left to do was entertain their guests when they began arriving. With the wizarding wireless on low in the

background, and a collection of drinks ready to serve, they were as ready as they would ever be.

Cedric and Cho arrived first and were very impressed with Harry's accommodation, Dobby had added another sofa and a couple of wing backed chairs to the area around what was now a roaring fire. When Fleur and Victor followed on, they were all sitting around the fire with a mixture of muggle and wizarding drinks. When Emma had heard that they were throwing their first 'dinner party' she had bought in some things that Dobby had transported to Hogwarts. Emma had reckoned that the witches and wizards there probably wouldn't have tasted muggle snacks, and she was right. For some unknown reason, the cheesy puffs proved very popular and the little elf's unseen hands continually had to refill that bowl.

Conversation was light as the company began feeling each other out to see what the others were prepared to reveal about themselves. It was a throwaway remark by Cho as they were sitting down to dinner that really set the ball rolling.

"I hope you're not serving basilisk steaks tonight Harry? I've heard that is a real delicacy but I don't think I'm up to eating giant snake."

"Oh with Harry you get quite the choice. First year it was mountain troll."

Tonks could see where Hermione was going with this and quickly played along. Embarrassing Harry was fast becoming her new favourite pastime. "Yeah, second year you could have had acromantula or basilisk while third year was poor dining fare. There isn't a lot of eating in Dementors."

This was greeted by four open mouths and Harry was forced to fill in some of the blanks. This got Fleur talking about growing up in France and what her Veela heritage meant. Victor heartily bemoaned the lack of opportunities to do something like this, just sit and have a meal with friends without having to worry about anything appearing in the press. Cedric was able to talk about being raised as a pureblood wizard in a changing Britain while everyone found Cho's heritage and how she ended up at Hogwarts fascinating. Tonks though kept the evening going with stories of her time at Hogwarts and going through auror training. Her morphing abilities were also

demonstrated, her Granger family member disguise certainly caught a certain Bulgarian's interest.

They all had a good time and it wasn't until the evening was breaking up that the tournament got a mention. Fleur had managed to have a quiet word with Hermione just before she left. "I really want to thank you for inviting me tonight, I had a lovely time. I think you and Cho are so brave to be facing the next task, that is why Victor and I came alone. If they stick that Davies boy down there, I may just leave him."

Hermione gave a nervous laugh, not wanting to let Fleur know she hadn't the slightest clue what the French champion was talking about. She also quickly decided not to mention that little tidbit to Harry, he really had enough on his plate as it was with the approaching second task. They were learning so much from the Black library but so far a method for Harry to escape this tournament with his magic intact had eluded them. The entire 'forced to compete' thing came under a grey area where magical contracts could be judged on so many different variables, and their many combinations of adherence to the rules of aforementioned magical contract. Hermione hated grey areas with a passion. You were basically reduced to giving your best guess about what might happen, Hermione much preferred hard facts to guesses.

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Harry certainly had enough on his plate to worry about, this would be his first Valentine's Day since he and Hermione got together. Again he went to 'big sis' for advice, Tonks had steered him right at Christmas and he was counting on her again.

He met Hermione that morning as normal though immediately wished her a happy Valentine's Day to let her know he hadn't forgotten. The trio made their way down to the great hall for breakfast and both Gryffindors were glad no one had ever attempted to recreate Lockhart's efforts from their second year. Hermione had barely sat herself at the Gryffindor table when Hedwig swooped down with a bouquet of roses for her.

As well as a kiss from his delighted betrothed, Harry also received a bit of a ribbing from his male housemates about trying to make them look bad. That ribbing soon found a new target when a regal owl

delivered a spectacular and exotic bouquet to a blushing Ginny Weasley.

With the short break this gave him, Harry had took a moment to have a quiet word with Hermione. "I have a gift for you and a dinner for two planned in my rooms for later."

"You are spoiling me. I don't need things Harry, just spending some time alone with you tonight is more than enough for me." Their moment of quiet was disturbed by a spluttering Tonks who was sitting as usual on the other side of Harry. They saw her remove a rose from an owl's leg but it was the other three waiting in line, and a couple more circling overhead that had drawn the spluttering.

"I was never this popular when I was at Hogwarts as a student, what the hell is going on here?"

"Well, they say that wizards love a girl in uniform. You are a beautiful witch Tonks and that auror robe doesn't do any harm either. I actually have some chocolates for you back in my room but didn't want to give them to you down here. We don't want anyone getting the wrong idea or the Prophet will be after us again."

"Hermione, I think it's a good job you got this one wrapped up quickly. Our Mr Potter here is getting just too cute to be let loose on unsuspecting witches. Thank you Harry but what the hell do I do about this?"

"Smile and graciously accept it, while checking if any of them are from Victor, and definitely any edibles for potions. Hermione has nothing to be concerned about Tonks, I have a wonderful girlfriend and I'm trying to be the best boyfriend I can be."

This earned Harry another quick kiss from his beaming girlfriend before she asked him a question. "Just to be clear here, did you send any other girls a present for Valentine's Day?"

Harry appeared rather sheepish before answering. "Well..."

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Emma had very quickly gotten used to having Dobby looking after them but entering the kitchen and seeing her a jug of coffee appear

on the table still held the power to amaze her every morning. She really enjoyed the weekends where she had time to sit and appreciate the little guy's efforts. When the vase of roses appeared on the table just after tasting her first sip of coffee, their beauty took her breath away. That was until she read the note that accompanied them.

Dan loved sitting at their kitchen table, reading the Sunday papers while taking his time and enjoying his 'Dobby made' breakfast. This morning, he entered the kitchen to find his wife sobbing while staring at the beautiful roses in the centre of their table. Emma simply couldn't answer her husband at the moment so just handed over the note for Dan to read. He recognised the writing at once.

Emma,

These flowers are for you as a small token of my thanks for what you and the entire Granger family did for me over the Christmas holidays. In ten days the second task will be on us and, should the worst happen, I wanted you to know how much you and Dan's kindness has meant to me.

Hermione has worked tirelessly, spending hours scouring through books and researching the law on contracts. It would appear there is no solution to this problem, other than the one we're attempting. We have taken all the precautions we can think of but, should the ministry react negatively, please ensure Hermione doesn't blame herself.

She has been nothing but supportive to me since our first meeting on the Hogwarts express when we were both eleven and I find myself falling in love with your daughter a little bit more each day. In my better dreams I see Hermione and I being married one day and calling you mum. This is something I want with all my heart yet it always seems as if forces in my life are all set to make sure I don't get a happy ending.

Should the ministry wipe my memories regardless, please show Hermione this letter, and get her the hell out of Hogwarts. I thought long and hard about admitting all this to you but the growing feeling that something is about to happen finally made me sit and write this letter. I would like nothing better than for you and Dan to spend the summer teasing me mercilessly about my foolish angsty confessions

because that would mean I remember not only you both but Hermione too. That is one teasing I definitely look forward to.

The very idea of not remembering how beautiful Hermione was that night of your dentistry ball terrifies me more than I can say and I don't think I could go through this without your daughter by my side. I am trying to stay positive yet prepare for the worst. With that in mind, Dobby will inform you of what happens next week as soon as decisions are made. I have been informed the task takes place at nine thirty next Wednesday morning so we should know one way or another by about lunchtime.

Hoping the news will be good

Harry

Dan had a lump in his throat the size of a grapefruit by the time he'd finished reading and could only try to comfort Emma with his arms around her. He didn't trust his voice not to break if he tried to use it.

They sat like that for some time until a clearly worried Dobby popped in front of them, the little elf was nervously wringing his ears with his hands. "Did Dobby do something wrong?"

Dan's voice crackled with emotion as he answered. "No Dobby, you did nothing wrong. How are the kids today?"

This brightened up Dobby's day, he always took any opportunity to talk about Harry Potter. "Master Harry had Hedwig surprise Miss Hermione with flowers at breakfast and tonight Dobby gets to cook them a special dinner."

Seeing the elf so happy and excited at the prospect of serving the young couple helped Emma get her tears under some control, she reminded herself they weren't beaten yet. "Dobby, could you please tell Harry thank you for the beautiful flowers. It was very thoughtful of him, and I'm sure these will be the only ones I'll be getting today as Dan doesn't know what day it is."

A rather bemused Dan answered, "It's Sunday."

"Sunday, the fourteenth of February."

Dan responded to Emma's jibe with a mock growl, "Another man sending my wife flowers on Valentine's Day, I won't have it. That bloody boy is making me look bad."

Dobby had been spending enough time with Sirius to understand Dan was joking, the slight smile on Emma's face meant that her husband was successful. He reckoned that it would be alright to serve breakfast now and popped away to do so.

Both dentists ate in silence, all thoughts of anything other than the two teenagers at Hogwarts forgotten. It was Emma who eventually broke the quiet. "Reading that letter just brought it home to me how much danger the two of them are in, do you doubt for a second our Hermione will be anywhere but by Harry's side no matter what happens? It also hammered home just how much I'll miss Harry if we can no longer see him. We only spent a couple of weeks with him and yet it's easy to see how much it's affecting us, our daughter is going to be devastated. You know she really loves him, don't you?"

Dan nodded in acceptance of everything Emma just said. "That's why I signed their betrothal. They both appear so right for each other, what else could I do. I think we should close the practice next Wednesday, neither of us will be able to concentrate on anything other than waiting on news from Hogwarts." Dan hated saying the next bit but had to, his family's safety could be on the line here.

"I think we have to take Harry's warning seriously and, should the worse happen, get Hermione not only out of Hogwarts but out of Britain too! We've talked about Australia in the past, this summer might be the time to make the move."

The tears were once more running down Emma's cheeks at how helpless they were in this whole situation. She also detested the idea of what seemed to her like abandoning Harry to his fate. With no magic or memories of the Grangers available to Harry, then all their options were exceedingly limited. Getting Hermione out the country might be the only option left open to them.

What was really driving the tears was that she knew for certainty Harry would agree totally with that option. Even while the young man was facing life changing events, his letter clearly displayed his first thoughts and concerns were for Hermione. When he mentioned one

day calling her mum, Harry had reopened a wound in her heart that she thought had healed many years ago. Emma always wanted another child, preferably a brother for Hermione. Having Harry as a son-in-law would close that wound forever, he would be welcomed into their family with open arms.

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On discovering that one of her gifts was tainted with potions, Tonks was ready to behead anyone who as much as glanced at her the wrong way. It was left to Harry to make a suggestion.

"Hermione and I will be staying in the room all evening, take the chocolates to the ministry and find out what potions have been added. If they're from the twins then it'll be a harmless prank, if it's more serious than that then we really need to know."

The auror stopped suddenly in her pacing up and down the room as Harry's words cut through her raging anger with an icy blade. She had just assumed it was some hormonal teen trying to slip her a form of love potion. That someone might be trying to put her out of the way to get at Harry should have been the first thing that crossed her mind, Tonks was now angry with herself that it wasn't.

"I don't think that's a good idea Harry, at least the bit about me leaving you tonight. Can I ask Dobby to take these to Amelia Bones? You're right in that we need to know just what someone had planned for me. I'm telling you this now though, if they were meant to turn me into a canary then a pair of redheaded twins are going to have a lot of pain in their future."

She wrote a note to accompany the evidence while Harry got ready for his dinner date. Tonks would take her meal in her room tonight. This would give the kids some alone time while keeping her away from whoever attempted to poison her with potions. Amelia Bones would go nuts that someone had attempted a potions attack on one of her aurors, the analysis of those chocolates could really open another can of worms.

Hermione was greeted by Harry wearing some of the smart clothes they'd bought over the Christmas holidays. After being thoroughly kissed, Harry led her to the candlelit table for two and held her chair as she sat. Hermione noticed a wrapped gift waiting on the table for

her. "You are certainly spoiling me Harry, though I did get a gift for you too."

Dobby had outdid himself and the meal was wonderful, Harry thought that chocolate concoction at the end was to die for. As Harry helped Hermione to her feet, the table and chairs disappeared with timing and precision any theatre stagehand would have been envious of. The wizarding wireless then sprang to life as Harry held his betrothed close while they danced to the music.

"Harry, this has been a wonderful evening, thank you so much."

He knew the next bit would be controversial but pushed on ahead. "I'm glad you enjoyed it, you've been hitting the books so hard lately that we haven't had a lot of time to ourselves." Kissing Hermione at this point seemed to be the best method of cutting off an angry retort. Harry then continued what he wanted to say.

"I don't think we are going to find any answers to this problem because I don't think there are any to find. I would rather spend the time before the tournament having more nights like this, nights where we just hold each other close while we dance. You've done everything you can and we've planned as much as we can. Yes we keep training but let's just enjoy ourselves for the rest of the time."

Harry didn't say 'time we've got left' but both understood this was what he meant without the words needing to be spoken. She held him tighter and swore she wouldn't cry, the feeling of failure was not something Hermione was used to. She couldn't deny Harry was right though, she'd reached the same conclusion at least a week ago but hated to admit it. By way of an answer, she lifted her head to kiss the most important person in the world to Hermione Granger. She would never accept they were beaten but needed no further prompting to spend the following days in Harry's arms. If they got through this unscathed, Hermione hoped to spend the rest of her life in those same two arms.

-oOoOo-

The eve of the second task saw the excitement and expectation reach fever pitch within the castle, there were quite different emotions playing out in the Potter quarters. Their nightly dances had become something of a ritual and tonight Hermione didn't want to let

Harry go. Tonks had to accompany Harry as he led the reluctant witch back to the Gryffindor dorm, otherwise Hermione would have never let him out of her sight. Ginny and Neville returning from wherever they had been helped the crying girl into the common room while Harry and Tonks headed back quickly to avoid being out after curfew.

Harry was certain he wouldn't sleep a wink tonight so he was even more surprised when he was awakened by his bedroom door being crashed open. The petrificus totalus hit him before Harry had time to think, never mind react. He recognized the greasy haired git who had cursed him from the doorway but couldn't move a muscle to do anything about it. Harry also couldn't understand why Tonks wasn't flying in here with spells spewing from her wand. That question was soon answered as Snape moved aside to let someone else enter the room.

"Harry my boy, I can't tell you how disappoint I am in you. Did you really think we wouldn't figure out your planned non-participation in the second task?"

The question was purely rhetorical since Harry was currently unable to answer.

"I'm left to assume you never bothered deciphering the clue for the task, despite repeated offers of assistance from Hogwarts staff members. Well, as I believe I mentioned once before, at Hogwarts help will always be given to those who ask for it. Yes, even to those too stubborn to ask for it. It will be entirely your decision whether you chose to accept that help or not. The second task involves the taking a hostage who each champion will sorely miss, care to guess who we chose to be your hostage?"

Harry could only move his eyes but he was using them to great effect, conveying exactly what he was thinking. His pupils had widened as he quickly figured out Hermione would be his hostage before his glare hardened on the two wizards currently in his room.

"As I said Harry, the choice to participate will still be yours. Miss Granger will be held at the bottom of the Black Lake by the merpeople and you have a one hour time limit in which to rescue her. Should you chose to do so, what we have here is a magical plant

called gillyweed that will allow you to breath underwater for one hour from swallowing it."

Snape threw a small bag of something onto his bedside table.

"The spell you are currently under should wear off before nine o'clock, giving you just enough time to make your way down to the Black Lake. I suggest you spend the hours between now and then thinking about your future, a future you seem determined to throw away. I suspect Miss Granger is a bad influence on you and we shall sit down and discuss this very subject, amongst many others, after the task."

Harry's eyes were now projecting nothing but hatred toward the two wizards who were currently trespassing in his room, clearly intent on running his life for him.

"Oh, and in case you're expecting your auror friend to come to your rescue, I'm afraid that won't be happening. Who would have guessed she was a secret drinker? The pressure must have finally gotten to her and I doubt Miss Tonks will be surfacing much before lunchtime. This would undoubtedly end her career if this news ever got out, again the choice is yours."

Harry knew this was a complete crock of shit, Tonks would never drink while on the job, far less get blinding drunk.

"Well my boy, we'll leave you to your decision. If you want to leave Miss Granger at the bottom of the lake, who are we to say that's wrong?"

Harry was using every curse word he knew in his head as the two bastards left him alone. They had all expected Dumbledore to take some sort of action, this though was way beyond anything they had considered. There was no way Harry could leave Hermione down there and he was now berating himself for not deciphering the clue before coming up with this stupid plan.

A soft pop heralded Dobby's arrival and a snap of the devoted elf's fingers saw Harry once more able to move.

"Dobby is sorry Harry Potter sir but you gave Dobby an order not to be seen by anyone at Hogwarts. Dobby so wanted to help you before now."

"Don't worry about it Dobby, you did brilliantly just by setting me free. We need to see if we can help Tonks..." As Harry grabbed the bag of Gillyweed and attempted to leave the room, Dobby stood in front of him.

"Dobby has heard from the castle elves that the dark one has been soaking that plant in nasty potions. These potions would make the eater listen to whatever the headmaster said. Dobby didn't know they were going to give potions plant to Harry Potter."

Harry dropped the bag as if he'd been burned by it. Dumbledore had very effectively taken away the two people he'd been banking on most. He was desperate to save Hermione yet using the solution supplied here would certainly cost him his betrothed in the long run, Dumbledore would see to that. "That old bastard, what are we going to do now?"

A/N Thanks for reading.

I know, one hell of a place to leave the story. I hope readers of 'Different Halloween' will forgive me if I begin writing the tenth chapter of this one next, otherwise I might just get lynched.

Chapter 10

For some reason Albus was reminded of the Hogwarts Express as Amelia Bones came clattering toward him, this though had nothing to do with the expression 'old boiler'. No, Amelia's temper was certainly hot enough to boil water and she fairly had a head of steam up now as the head of the DMLE rushed in his direction. Albus wouldn't have been surprised if she left a trail of smoke in her wake. What did surprise him was the half a dozen aurors following on behind like carriages.

As it was now nine o'clock, it was imperative he keep Amelia busy just in case Potter accidentally ran into her before the task began. After the lad emerged from the water, those potions would ensure Potter wouldn't hear a bad word said to Albus Dumbledore, far less make a complaint against his beloved headmaster.

On the off-chance the little shit still refused to participate in the task, Albus had arranged with a couple of mermen that Miss Granger would meet with a tragic accident down there. The boy had been conditioned since he was a toddler to accept the blame for everything that went wrong in his life, the death of his betrothed due to the lad's inactions should shatter any resolve he'd recently discovered into tiny pieces. It would also remove the protection his betrothal gave him and, with no magic, Cornelius would drop Potter quicker than a handful of warm Hippogriff shit.

He needed the magical community's only weapon against Voldemort under his supervision and control. Even if Potter lost his magic, Albus would have him becoming Filch's apprentice and spending his days cleaning up after those he deliberately renounced. One way or another, Albus would have total control of the boy by lunchtime. He would figure out the best way to use the boy after he discovered what he had to work with. Worst case scenario, he would strap explosive potions to the now muggle boy and, at the appropriate time, send him out to take Voldemort with him. He would at least give the last of the Potters a martyr's death, that was all Albus really had to offer the boy.

Amelia didn't stand on any ceremony. "Where is Auror Tonks and Mr Potter, I need to speak with them?"

Albus was aware they were drawing more than glances, it would seem this confrontation was destined to become the pre-task entertainment. "I'm sorry Amelia, that won't be possible until after the second task. Since there is a one hour time limit on it though, that shouldn't be too long to wait?"

Again Amelia steamed right in. "Are you aware someone tried to poison my auror with potions?"

Albus just shrugged it off. "Mere schoolboy pranks Amelia, I'm sure that's all it was."

She wasn't here to be brushed off with some glib excuse, this matter was way too serious now. "I don't think this was any schoolboy prank Dumbledore, someone tried to get control of my auror."

Albus decided to muddy the waters even more, and also cast some more assertions on the young auror's character. He never could resist an opportunity to gloat 'I told you so'. "Ah, I was afraid something like this might happen, you'll remember I was against this action of yours from the start. Miss Tonks is a beautiful young woman who has been interacting with the student body, one might even go as far as to say flirting with some of them. I noticed she received quite a few gifts from her many 'admirers' on Valentine's Day."

They now had every pair of eyes on them, considering the alternative for the gathered crowd was to stare at the Black Lake then it was perhaps understandable. Amelia decided to very publicly tear down Dumbledore's flimsy defense. "One of those gifts was laced with a potion no schoolboy brewed. It took two potion masters all this time to isolate and identify it, and also discover exactly what its purpose was. I hardly think a schoolboy would be slipping my auror a potion that would force her to basically do whatever Albus Dumbledore commanded her to?"

Albus straightened to his full height, towering intimidatingly over the much smaller woman. "Are you implying that I had something to do with this alleged incident Amelia?"

The head of the DMLE was not for giving an inch, instead she pushed right back. "I have no intention of implying anything, I'm saying here and now that you're involved in this right up to your neck."

You may have managed to escape the basilisk enquire with a mere reprimand on your record but this is a direct attack on one of my aurors. I give you fair warning, my investigation will begin the moment I speak to Auror Tonks." This development was drawing gasps from the crowd close enough to hear what was being said but Amelia wasn't finished yet. "This is supposed to be a school but you seem to treat it as your own private playground, a playground where our children's safety means nothing to you. It would appear that there is an immediate need for more aurors to be positioned inside the castle, at least until we get rid of the incompetents who are supposedly running it."

Dumbledore had no intention of allowing that to happen but before he could answer, a disturbance out in the Black Lake stole everyone's attention. A spout of water shot about twenty feet into the air and there were visible flashes of light below the surface. A quick glance at the platform showed Albus the other three champions were already getting prepared, where was Potter?

The disturbance was getting closer so Albus headed down from the judging stand to the floating platform, with Amelia and her aurors following on right behind him. It was now obvious to everyone that the disturbance was underwater spell fire, and that there was more than one source of those spells.

Amelia's monocle wasn't there purely as a personal eccentricity, it more than earned its keep. With a slight turn of the wire ring, her vision in that eye was suddenly greatly magnified and Amelia recognised at once who she was seeing underwater. "Auror under attack! Four strongest swimmers, I want bubblehead charms now and offer immediate assistance. Other two, take positions on the platform to provide covering fire."

The aurors were well trained and complied at once, even with Dumbledore trying to stop them. "You can't interfere with the competition."

The four splashes answered him before Amelia let rip verbally. "The task hasn't started yet so they won't be interfering, looks like I'm going to get to speak with Auror Tonks quicker than we thought."

Albus suffered a moment of panic until he was finally able to make out the features of the original two swimmers, both Harry and the

auror were under the effects of gillyweed. How Harry had managed to pull this off was now irrelevant, the potions flowing through their bloodstreams would forever alter their brain chemistry. He would like to see Amelia try to use his puppets against him now.

When Hermione's head broke through the surface of the lake she was released from the spell's effects immediately, only to find hands trying to separate her from what she could now see was Harry. She shook them off and plunged back under the freezing water, desperate to discover if he was unharmed.

Harry felt Hermione cling to him and could only think of one way to assure her he was fine, he held her close and kissed her. This allowed him to breathe for both of them and a warming charm cast ensured she would at least not get hyperthermia from the freezing water. Tonks was right beside them and the trio now had an honour guard of another four aurors. After the morning he'd had, Harry was quite happy to keep Hermione in his arms. When the gillyweed wore off minutes later, they both surfaced together as willing hands swiftly helped the young couple out the water and onto the platform. Tonks was mere seconds behind them.

A trident shot from the water, aiming to impact right between Hermione's shoulder blades before the pink haired Auror forced the pair of them down. Amelia and her two aurors still on the surface opened fire in the direction the weapon had come from, as did her aurors still in the water. A merman was seen to float to the surface, he was quickly captured and manacled to the dock.

It took mere seconds for Albus to discover his plan had failed miserably. Poppy Pomfrey pushed through to see if anyone required her assistance, only to be met with a pair of wands in her face.

Tonks and Harry may still be dripping freezing water but their wands were steadily held on the shocked healer, the young auror's voice held authority that belied her youth. "Don't come any closer. You work for Dumbledore so you're not getting anywhere near these two."

There were still two aurors in the lake, guarding their prisoner, but Amelia and the other four formed a protective circle around the trio. "Report Auror Tonks."

Before Tonks could say anything, Dobby popped into the centre of the protective circle. A snap of his fingers and his family were dry once more, three blankets and mugs of steaming hot chocolate followed before Dobby hugged a still shivering Hermione's leg. "Dobby is so sorry Miss, he should have stopped the bad kitty taking you away. Dobby will not let that happen again, nobody will hurt Dobby's family."

Harry affectionately rubbed the little guy's ears. "Dobby, you saved us all. I want you to stay here until the task is over." He then glanced toward the other three champions. "I'm really sorry guys but it was like a war zone down there, the meremen really didn't want me to get Hermione. I recognised Cho as one of the hostages and I think they've took your young sister Fleur."

With a strangled shriek of "Gabrielle!", Fleur was ready to dive in the lake right away. Victor and Cedric managed to get a hold of her.

"We need to wait until the task begins, it's only a few minutes."

Amelia made an instant decision. "I'm sending an auror guard down there with each of you." She held her hand up to forestall any objections from Dumbledore or the organisers. "They won't interfere with the task, they will just provide protection from any attacking mermen. Get the task underway and then we'll hear what happened to these three." When the head of the DMLE gave commands, people jumped to obey them.

The three strongest swimmers amongst the aurors present paired off with a champion, each of whom now had a very determined expression on their faces. Fleur in particular appeared ready to tear the throat out of anything that dared to stop her reaching her sister.

Dobby had conjured a love seat with a high back to protect his family from the biting wind, Harry had Hermione on his knee with the blankets covering both of them. His wand was still in his hand, as was Tonks' who assumed her customary position behind them.

Amelia conjured her own chair and sat facing the couple, the other two aurors standing guard over their boss. There was now quite a few people that had made their way down to the platform but auror wands insured they, and especially Dumbledore, kept a respectful distance. Until Amelia heard what happened, no one was going to

be let anywhere near these three. As the second task started, so did the interrogation.

What had been overlooked by everyone was that the platform had been charmed so that the people in the stands could hear what was being said. Since all the tournament action was taking place below the lake, this now easily became the main event.

Amelia Bones' voice rang out clear and true around the assembled stands and had the audience on the edge of their seats waiting on answers. "Can you please explain what happened here this morning? Why did you choose to start the task early and take my auror with you?"

Harry Potter's voice was also clearly recognisable. "Can we hear from Hermione first? I would like to know how my betrothed ended up unconscious at the bottom of the Black Lake, without her wand or the dragon hide vest I bought for Hermione's protection. Especially since Auror Tonks and myself escorted her to Gryffindor tower just before curfew last night."

The witch in question was currently clinging to Harry for dear life, this was always going to be a horrendous morning without this complication. Her betrothed had been forced once more to risk his life and save her, something Hermione was extremely angry about. This clearly came across to the now massive audience in her voice. "McGonagall woke me in the middle of the night and ordered me to accompany her, I told her I was going nowhere without Harry being there. These were the instructions clearly laid down to her by my betrothed. She stunned me and the next thing I remember was waking up as Harry was trying to help me out the lake. She must have flung this on me, I only have my pajamas under this robe."

Harry had suspected it must be something like that, this didn't make him any less angry. "Madam Bones, a Hogwarts professor clearly violated my orders concerning my betrothed. She also deliberately placed her in a situation that put Hermione in mortal peril, that trident could have killed her if not for Auror Tonks quick thinking, and even quicker reactions. I intend to bring formal charges."

Minerva McGonagall was one of the people now on the platform, her complexion was as grey as the February sky at hearing those words. She didn't really notice that the others around her were subtly

edging away from her presence, all Minerva could see was the end of her career and possible time in prison. Had she remembered that the entire event was being broadcast on WWN, Minerva might have realised that the whole country would be disgusted by her actions against a student supposedly in her care.

Amelia nodded to Harry, "I shall of course have her arrested to answer those charges. Could you please tell me why you went to rescue Miss Granger before the task officially started? Are you aware what will happen to you when the time limit is up and you haven't officially competed?"

Harry's answer shocked everyone listening. "Not to compete in the second task was my intention from the beginning. I've had enough of Dumbledore and Hogwarts, this was my opportunity to walk away from both."

The only sound that could be heard after that statement was the lake lapping against the platform. As it slowly sunk in what Harry Potter had planned to do, no one knew what to say.

Harry now told his tale. "Just before seven o'clock this morning, Snape burst into my bedroom and hit me with a petrificus totalus. Dumbledore followed soon after and told me he was on to my plans and couldn't allow that to happen. He also told me Hermione was at the bottom of the lake and Tonks was drunk so wouldn't be able to help me. Snape chuckled a bag of gillyweed at me before Dumbledore explained what it would do, they deliberately left out the bit where it was soaked in a potion that would make me the old man's lapdog. Have you got the bag there Dobby?"

Dobby was handing Amelia the tainted plant when a blasting curse was fired at it. Harry's shield charm diverted the curse harmlessly out across the lake while Tonks and the other two aurors rained stunners down in the direction that it came from. Of the seven people now on the ground, only one had a wand in their hand. Severus Snape would wake in a ministry cell with the charge of attempting to destroy evidence now added to the rapidly growing list.

After the innocent bystanders had been revived, Amelia decided to make a bold move. She would have preferred more back-up since Tonks wasn't moving any further than touching distance from her

charge but a confrontation was better happening now than any repeat of what just took place.

"Albus Dumbledore, I am placing you under arrest. I'm willing to bet the ministry potion masters will find this potion a match for the one in the chocolates sent to Auror Tonks. Your wand sir."

Amelia's confidence was boosted by the sight of Minister Fudge rapidly making his way toward them, or rather the squad of aurors that accompanied him.

With that, Albus knew the game was up. Minerva was drawing him daggers from where she stood, she'd never fully bought into their plan and the head of Gryffindor would soon be spouting everything she knew. This was one of the pitfalls of being denied the time to plan for all eventualities, things could go seriously wrong. Albus had been forced to gamble heavily and just lost, now it would appear time to pay the piper.

He glanced down at Amelia's outstretched hand and was going to have to refuse, to hand over the elder wand would mean he was no longer its master. Knowing Voldemort was still out there meant this was not an option he could willingly accept. It was blindingly obvious he had spectacularly lost this particular battle but Albus was well aware it was who won the war that history would remember.

With all eyes on him, Dumbledore reached for his hat and doffed it in the direction of the young couple. "Well played young Harry, very well played. Until we meet again..." The last four words were the phrase that activated the emergency Portkey the wily old wizard kept in his hat, Albus Dumbledore disappeared before anyone could react.

McGonagall stepped forward, holding her wand out handle first. As the auror took it and slapped on the manacles, her eyes locked on the Gryffindor couple at the centre of this fiasco and attempted to justify her actions. "Mr Potter, Albus assured me it was vital to our world that you retained your magic. That is why I reached the decision I did, I can only hope you haven't doomed us all."

Harry was cuddling Hermione into him while waiting on the time when his magic would leave his body, McGonagall's opinion and feelings weren't exactly high on his list of priorities at the moment. "If

that is the case, then shouldn't I have known about it? You've shown who you follow time and time again, your Gryffindor students always came second to whatever Dumbledore wanted. You almost got Hermione killed today, we think you deserve everything that's going to happen to you now."

McGonagall was led away, a broken witch.

Most of the spectators had turned up here and thought they would be bored staring at the surface of the lake, this was just as exciting as watching the dragons. McGonagall and Snape arrested while Dumbledore ran away, this was probably more exciting than any task.

Cornelius approached the couple with a view to getting them somewhere a lot more private. His secretary had alerted him to what was being broadcast on the WWN and he had grabbed a squad of aurors before racing to Hogwarts. "Mr Potter, Miss Granger, perhaps we could move to a more private location to hear the rest of your story?"

Harry shook his head immediately. "Sorry minister, if I'm going to lose my magic then I want to do it here. Let everyone see that I would rather be a muggle than Dumbledore's little puppet. I also want to see my friends emerging from the water, Fluer's sister appeared about eight and yet they stuck her at the bottom of a lake in the middle of February. Doesn't anyone else here see how wrong that is?"

Cornelius could see the lad was close to the edge, it was probably only his betrothed holding him close that kept Harry calm enough to answer them. The minister was sure he was not alone in wondering how they had managed to treat this young wizard so abysmally that he was prepared to give up his magic to see the back of them. He conjured another chair for himself beside Amelia's, deciding the public would probably lynch him if he stopped the story at this part.

Harry was cuddling into Hermione while Dobby stood at his master's side and Tonks never left her post of being right behind them, it was left to the young auror to take up the story. "I awoke in a body bind while Dumbledore used a funnel to pour firewhisky into me, they must have been too scared to use potions again after their last failure. I was supposed to be so drunk that I would be no use to

Harry. it would be my word against Dumbledore's and Harry would be under his complete control. Dobby here saved us all. Not only did he get fresh gillyweed, he also fetched a sobering potion to get me back on my feet."

Amelia filled the minister in on what had happened earlier with the potions in the chocolates before Tonks continued. "Hermione was already under the lake by the time they attacked us and Harry wouldn't trust her rescue to anyone but himself. I of course wasn't letting him go down there without me so we disillusioned ourselves and headed for the lake."

She took another gulp of her hot chocolate, blessing Dobby for the warming charm on the mug. "We took the merepeople by surprise and had Hermione free without too much trouble but then they pursued us all the way to the dock. It was easy to tell Hermione didn't have her armour on and they were firing darts and spears at us, you've no idea how pleased I was when the cavalry turned up."

Something about this was troubling Fudge. "Auror Tonks, were you aware Mr Potter intended not to compete today?"

Tonks glanced down at Harry who gave her a slight nod. "Yes minister, none of us liked it but really couldn't argue with the alternative. Harry reckoned it was only a matter of time before his luck ran out and one of the deadly situations he kept getting thrust into eventually killed him. My job is to keep him alive minister, I would give my life to see those aims met."

The sincerity in the auror's words rang out for the entire country to hear. The questions were halted as the first champion made it back. Cho awoke the instant Cedric held her out the water. With the focus switching back to the competition, Harry sat and awaited his fate. He had Hermione on his knee, Tonks was behind him with her hand now on his shoulder while Dobby was at his side and cuddling into his leg. Harry had wanted a family his entire life, he would know in mere minutes if he was going to be allowed to keep it.

Cho and Cedric had now been told what was going on. Ignoring everyone, including the aurors and minister of magic, Cho dragged Cedric over there. "Harry, why are you doing this?"

You couldn't miss the concern in their friends' faces and Harry felt they deserved an answer. "I'm sick of fighting three-headed dogs, dementors and dragons. I just want to go to school, hang out with my friends and kiss my beautiful betrothed. I have to do this guys, Dumbledore would never have let me leave Hogwarts any other way."

The commotion behind them was Victor emerging from the lake with his hostage, closely followed by Fleur clutching a shivering Gabrielle. The relief Harry experienced was easily felt by all those who currently had a hold of him, his early rescue of Hermione had obviously not harmed any of the other three hostages. His relief was short lived though as the hooter signaled the hour was up, the time was now upon him.

A hush had settled over the floating platform as everyone waited to see what would happen next, all eyes were on Harry Potter.

The boy at the centre of the storm felt...nothing, well nothing different. He kissed Hermione and then attempted to cast his patronus. Prongs shot out his wand and pranced around the platform before disappearing. Hermione was beginning to smile when a spectator's scream alerted everyone that something was wrong. The Auror response was swift, they had their boss, the minister and a country wide audience listening in. Six of them rushed to the scene of the disturbance to find a man rolling on the ground. He had a peg leg strapped to his knee though he obviously didn't need it while the device on his face to hold a false eye told the aurors everything they needed to know.

He somehow still managed to cast a curse at them, although nothing actually left his wand. Half a dozen stunners ensured he wasn't getting another chance. When the man was identified, the shit really hit the fan.

"That's Barty Crouch Jr."

"He was Mad Eye Moody until a minute ago."

Amelia wasn't the head of the DMLE for nothing, she quickly put it together. "The mystery of who put Mr Potter's name in the cup would appear to have been solved. Now all we have to do is discover why."

The mood in the Potter camp had just sky rocketed. Harry was on his feet, engulfed in a hug of epic proportions by a crying Tonks and Hermione while the happiest elf in the world danced around the trio. Celebrations were also breaking out around the stands, led by the Gryffindors.

They may have lost their head of house in a shameful manner but they also saw a stunned Snape carted away like a piece of meat and still had Harry Potter.

Amelia had made a beeline for Percy Weasley, she wanted some answers. "Where is your boss?"

"Mr Crouch has been ill, I have been filling in for him."

"You? A first year intake 'filling in' for a departmental head, who authorised that?"

Percy was squirming like a worm as Amelia pinned him with her gaze. "Eh, it's more of an ad hoc arrangement. No one has actually authorised it. Mr Crouch has been sending me messages of what he wants done and I have been using my initiative to see that it happens."

Amelia had come through the auror ranks to get the top job, those well honed instincts that she had cultivated over all those years were now screaming at her that something was badly wrong here. "And just how long have you been showing this initiative Mr Weasley?"

Had Percy been a bit more savvy on the way the real power works inside the ministry, he would have been looking for a hole to crawl into and pull over him. Instead, the naive stupid bugger started boasting about his prowess at handling the head of department job. "Oh, since before Christmas. I've told Mr Crouch not to worry, I can handle anything that comes up while he recovers. After all, his health is the most important issue here."

Amelia was ready to explode, "Wrong answer Mr Weasley. You will be taken to a ministry holding cell while we discover if you were in any way involved in this plot, or are just an incredibly stupid little boy."

An auror led the completely perplexed redhead away as Amelia turned to see Harry signaling frantically to her, she understood it was serious when Tonks cast a privacy bubble around them.

"Madam Bones, I've seen that man before. He was with the thing that is Voldemort during the summer and helped kill an old muggle caretaker. Peter Pettigrew was there too..."

Amelia understood at once what Harry was hinting at, catching Pettigrew was one of his greatest ambitions. She had a question though. "Mr Potter, just how did you see this? Are you a seer?"

Harry shook his head at that last part. "I have a connection that sometimes allows me to see what Voldemort is up to. I can't control it and so far it's only happened while I've been sleeping."

Amelia could see no way where these episodes could be considered a good thing. "Who else have you told about this?"

"Dumbledore."

"And what did he do about it?"

"He told me to let him know if I had any more."

Amelia was rubbing her temples while the vast array of curse words she had amassed over the years were running through her head. She didn't want to worry the lad, he'd already had quite the morning. "Mr Potter, by any chance did that old swine mention a prophecy concerning you?"

"Eh, no."

"I didn't think so. If I let Auror Tonks take you and your betrothed home to the Grangers, will you come to the ministry tomorrow? We really need to talk more about this but I have a few prisoners I want to question under truth serum first."

The large smiles both teens were now wearing were all the answer Amelia needed. The trio didn't even intend to return to the castle first, Dobby could fetch anything they needed later.

Amelia noticed the minister speaking with Flitwick and Sprout before the dilemma of Hogwarts sank in. The school had just lost its headmaster, two heads of house and the defence professor. She was glad that would be the minister's problem, she had quite enough on her plate. Issuing an arrest warrant for Albus Dumbledore and Barty Crouch before interviewing two Hogwarts heads of house and a dead death eater who clearly was alive. She intended to ask if Cornelius needed any more support from her department to help with the Hogwarts situation before heading back to the ministry.

Harry whispered to Dobby that he should go and tell Sirius what happened, they intended to surprise Dan and Emma by portkeying into the Granger's enclosed back garden.

The other champions were waiting to have a word with them before they left, any awkwardness died the minute Victor shook Harry's hand.

"Today, that is the bravest thing I have ever seen. You were prepared to give up everything to be free."

Harry still had Hermione wrapped around him as he answered Victor. "Not everything, something's were just too high a price. Hermione would still have been my betrothed even if I lost my magic."

Hermione quickly confirmed this. "You're not getting rid of me that easy Potter."

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Dan and Emma were nervously awaiting the pop that would signal Dobby's arrival with news of what had happened at Hogwarts, that the pop came from the back garden saw both parents moving in that direction without even thinking. The sight of the bedraggled and blanket covered trio instantly had Emma in tears, she shot across the grass to hug the kids. Dan was no less relieved and delighted but a tad more practical. On noticing the trio all had bare feet, he quickly shepherded the group into the warm house. Since Hermione and Harry didn't look like they were going to let go of each other anytime soon, and Emma wasn't for letting either of them go, all three plunked down on the sofa while Dan and Tonks sat across from them.

Before any questions could be asked, two elves popped into the room. Dobby had a tray filled with mugs of hot chocolate and warm scones while the little female had a fat envelope to deliver.

"Harry Potter sir, Winky has this for you from Master Sirius."

Reaching out to take the envelope from the curtsyng Winky, Harry asked her about his godfather. "How is Sirius?"

"Master Sirius is very happy Harry Potter sir still has his magic. Master Sirius did use a lot of really nasty words when talking about the headmaster. Winky thinks Master Sirius doesn't like him."

Dan was relieved that Harry was still magical, one less thing to worry about. He was far more concerned at the moment with the trio's attire, or lack of it. Harry and Tonks were wearing their dragon hide vests and underwear while Hermione's pajamas were clearly visible under her robe. Just what the hell had happened to them? He decided to wait until Harry opened the envelope from Sirius before getting the answers. They were safely home and that would do Dan, for now.

The envelope contained a set of house keys and a legal document, Harry handed both to Dan for an explanation while trying to get some more hot chocolate into Hermione. Dan's eyebrows shot up as he grasped what he held in his hands.

"Harry, it would appear your godfather bought a house, a house in the next street to ours. There's a brief note here." As Harry's mouth was now full off Dobby's delicious scone, he gestured for Dan to read it out to them.

"Hey Kiddo, I bought this house so you would never have to return to those relatives of yours ever again. One day, when I'm free, we'll live in it together. Can't tell you how pleased I am with how things went today, or how proud I am of how you handled the situation. The only way it could have gone any better was if Dumbledore hadn't escaped. You need to think carefully on what you do next. Listen to Tonks and the Grangers, not forgetting Hermione of course. You have a family around you now, let all of us help. Wishing I could be there for you ... Sirius"

There was a pause while everyone digested this new development before Dobby handed over one last thing. "Miss Hermione, Dobby fetched this from your dorm."

Hermione almost snatched her wand from the elf. "Oh thank you Dobby. I've felt so useless all morning because I haven't been able to do anything."

"I still can't believe that bitch put you down there with no armour or wand, and then tried to make out like it was my fault."

All these un-jointed bits of information were rapidly driving Dan nuts, it was time for some answers. "Okay, I want the full story, and I want it now."

By the time they were finished reliving their morning, both teens were clearly done in. It was also clear they still had no intention of releasing each other. Tonks transfigured the sofa into a bed while Hermione removed her robe and Harry took off his dragon hide vest. In under ten minutes, both were asleep still wrapped in each other's embrace as well as Dobby's blankets.

Dobby had already brought their things from Hogwarts and placed them in the rooms they'd used at Christmas, Tonks got changed before sitting down with Dan and Emma in the kitchen. Dan felt his emotions had taken a battering of hurricane proportions this morning but knowing both teens were safe and asleep in the other room kept him centered. It was time to plan ahead.

"What happens now?"

The question was obviously aimed at Tonks but the young Auror had no idea how to reply. "As of this moment, I have absolutely no idea. I think it's safe to say the British magical community has taken a pounding today, we'll all have to wait and see how this affects us."

Tonks knew this was certainly not what these concerned parents wanted to hear so tried to qualify her answer. "Albus Dumbledore was the most respected wizard in Britain, his fall from that position was swift and spectacular. To be honest, McGonagall ranked up there with Madam Bones as one of this country's most influential witches. Snape was just a bastard, pure and simple, while the undead death eater hints at a whole different level of corruption."

Hogwarts will be in chaos and the ministry are going to have one hell of a job trying to clear all this up. We should have a much better idea after we meet with Madam Bones tomorrow, sorry I couldn't be more help."

Emma wasn't about to stand for that. "You brought the both of them safely home, we couldn't ask for any more than that. Tomorrow will look after itself, let's just be thankful for today."

Tonks' smile never really reached her eyes. She'd seen the concerned look on her boss's face when Harry told her about that vision and this prophecy also weighed heavily on her mind. She hoped it was a simple prediction that Harry would become the best chef in the magical world but reckoned they weren't that lucky. She didn't want to trouble Dan or Emma with these worries though, deciding instead to take some good advice. Tomorrow would look after itself, and she'd be there to lend her wand if it needed a helping hand deciding.

A/N thanks for reading

I hope to have the next chapter of 'Different Halloween' posted before Christmas is upon us. As I haven't written one word of it yet, I hope you won't be too disappointed if I'm a day or so late.

Chapter 11

When Emma saw a bedraggled and exhausted Amelia Bones standing at her door first thing the next morning, she had the witch sitting with them at the breakfast table before any questions were asked. Amelia attempted to protest about not going to too much trouble on her account but Dobby had fresh coffee and a full English breakfast in front of her before she could really hit her stride. They all wanted to know if the plans for today were changed though no one asked as Amelia demolished the plate of food in front of her. It was blatantly obvious she had been up all night and Tonks was already trying to figure out just what the hell had gone on at the ministry

The breakfast had given Amelia a boost so, as she sipped her second cup of excellent coffee, she got down to the reason why she was here. "We are going to have to hold our meeting over until tomorrow, the last twenty four hours have caused more eruptions inside the ministry than at any time since a certain Halloween over a decade ago when Harry got that scar. It would appear all the same players from that terrible night were involved again yesterday."

Another sip of coffee helped Amelia put her thoughts in order for how she wanted to play this. "The wizard everyone thought was Alistor Moody turned out to be Barty Crouch Jr on pollyjuice potion, the real Moody was locked in his own multi-compartmental trunk. Barty was the one who put Harry's name in the goblet, he was also the person who lost his magic when Harry refused to compete in the second task. Our legal experts all agree that the goblet may have been confounded to spit out Harry's name but still recognised the magic of the person who put that name into the goblet in the first place. When Harry didn't compete, it considered that part of the magical contract to be with Barty. I know it sounds weird but so is confounding an ancient magical artefact. To our knowledge it had never been done before."

She was getting nods from everyone at the breakfast table, they'd all surmised it would be something along those lines beforehand and weren't too concerned about the legalities of the situation. Harry still had his magic and that was all that mattered. This next bit though was sure to throw them. "The fake Moody was working for his master, Voldemort, with the sole intention of serving Harry up on a plate. Voldemort planned to use Harry's blood and his dead father's

bones in a dark ritual which would have given him a new body. Unfortunately for us, there was a wizarding wireless in the house they were hiding in. By the time we pumped the information out of Barty Jr, they had run for the hills."

Harry's disappointment at this news was there for everyone to see, Amelia though had some good news for him. "They may have escaped but they had to leave everything behind, including Barty Crouch Sr and pages of notes on the ritual painstakingly copied in Pettigrew's own handwriting. These notes, combined with both Barty's confirming they'd seen Pettigrew serving Voldemort is more than enough evidence to grant Sirius Black a trial. Should you be able to contact him, please bring him into the ministry with you tomorrow at ten a.m. You have my personal guarantee he will be unharmed and given a fair hearing."

Harry's mood had done a swift one eighty and he now appeared ready to hug this wonderful woman. "Madam Bones, you have my personal guarantee he will be there."

"We will deal with the Sirius issue first, then your godfather will be able to be at your side for the rest of it. Mr and Mrs Granger, I would like to extend the same invitation to you both." If things went as bad as Amelia expected tomorrow, Harry would need all the support he could get.

Emma was picking up on some of this, Amelia being too tired to maintain her stoic demeanour that usually gave nothing away. "What aren't you telling us Madam Bones?"

Amelia held her hands up in defeat and decided honesty was the best policy. "I am not deliberately withholding information, we won't have that information until Harry comes to the ministry to discover what this prophecy says. My gut instincts are telling me that none of us will like what we hear. This prophecy was actually made to Dumbledore so he obviously knows what it contains. This would appear to be his justification for the way Harry has been treated. The old fool kept every bit of information to himself, believing no one else could possibly understand it. It is my intention to, where I possibly can, do the complete opposite."

Dan was having trouble understanding what all the fuss was about. "Just what is a prophecy, and what will it mean for these two?"

Surprisingly, it was Harry who answered. "I've actually heard one first hand. It's like a prediction of what will happen, though it didn't make any sense at the time."

Harry then rhymed off the prophecy Trelawney had made to him.

"It will happen tonight... The Dark Lord lies alone and friendless, abandoned by his followers. His servant has been chained these twelve years. Tonight, before midnight ... the servant will break free and set out to rejoin his master. The Dark Lord will rise again with his servant's aid, greater and more terrible than ever he was. Tonight ... before midnight ... the servant ... will set out ... to rejoin ... his master..."

Hermione now had her arm supportively around her betrothed as he continued. "That was the night we discovered Pettigrew, and I stopped Remus and Sirius killing the rat. He escaped that night because Remus had forgotten to take his potion and the rest is self-explanatory. If only I hadn't stopped them..."

"Harry, we can't go there, it will drive you crazy. If only I had gone with you back in first year when you faced Quirrell alone, if only I had taken you to the library with me when I remembered about a creature called a basilisk. We do the best we can with what we have and learn from our mistakes."

The determination and conviction in Harry's entire demeanour was frightening to see in one so young. "Well I certainly learned something, Pettigrew won't be able to run anywhere ever again if I get my wand on him."

Emma was slightly shocked at seeing this side of the young man she was rapidly coming to think of as family. "Could you really do something like that Harry?"

"Pettigrew was directly responsible for both my parents' deaths and my godfather going to Azkaban. He may have been living as a rat since that night but I can assure you he had a better life than I did at the Dursleys. Can I ask what you would do if you could get your hands on McGonagall?"

Emma was the one who now looked frightening. "I would rip that bit of tartan she seems so fond of wearing right off her robe and strangle the bitch with it. Please tell me she is going to get hers?"

The question was directed at Amelia and she was pleased to be able to answer in the affirmative. "I think it's safe to say Minerva McGonagall will get what's coming to her, and you don't know the half of it."

The head of the DMLE thought she must be getting too old to pull all nighters after letting that slip. With five pairs of eyes now focused on her, Amelia knew she couldn't leave it there. There was also the fact that she had promised this family she would tell them whatever she could. "This needs to be kept amongst the family at the moment, it will all come out at the trials. Apparently Dumbledore, Snape and McGonagall were alarmed with Mr Potter's new attitude, their investigation led to discovering the loophole he planned to use to escape their clutches. Instead of talking to Mr Potter about this, they concocted one stupid and highly illegal plan after another."

Dan was shaking his head from disbelief. "This is supposed to be a school full of children, not some poor quality horror movie set. We trusted these people with our children."

They couldn't miss the shudder of revulsion that passed through the tough witch. "One of their plans depended on Harry being in the castle, without Hermione, over the holidays. When your daughter returned to Hogwarts, Harry would have a girlfriend and a reason to retain his magic. He wouldn't have been able to resist as they planned on poisoning him, and this intended girlfriend they would choose for him, with love potions. They turned their focus onto pure blood witches, one of whom was my Susan." An evil smile now played across her lips. "It took three members of my department to pull me off McGonagall when I heard that. I had to exclude myself from conducting anymore of their interviews."

Harry and Hermione were now clinging to each other in shock at how close they came to not being a couple.

"Your betrothal put an end to that plan. Using those potions is bad enough, against a betrothed couple the charges dramatically magnify."

Harry eventually found his voice. "Madam Bones, we both like Susan and consider her a friend but..."

Amelia understood perfectly what Harry was having trouble trying to put into words. "You are a fine young wizard Harry and I hope that one day Susan will meet someone like you. To use potions on what are still considered children with the intention of forcing a relationship is something I will never stand for. You know how Susan dreads someone taking control of her mind, and I can't thank you enough for that necklace you gave her. I don't intend to mention these plans to her if I can avoid it."

Hermione's temper let go At this point, she had struggled playing the part of a demure betrothed and was glad she no longer had to. She blasted at a specific target who was at the centre of all this, the mere thought of Harry in another witch's arms fueling her rage. "That whiskered old wanker, who the fuck does he think he is? Snape doesn't surprise me in the slightest but McGonagall went along with this? I think it's time both Harry and I got our arses out of Hogwarts, surely the ministry wouldn't block us after this?"

The rest of the room was stunned into silence by Hermione's language so it allowed Amelia a moment to answer the young witch. "Miss Granger, I believe that you, and especially Mr Potter leaving Hogwarts at this time would be a blow that could bring down the ministry."

Both Granger parents were about to protest that may not be such a bad idea but Amelia held her hand up hoping to be allowed to continue. "Hogwarts is currently in turmoil, losing its headmaster, two heads of house plus another professor. There are going to have to be major changes made and all I would ask is to adopt a wait and see policy. Without drastic changes, my Susan will be leaving the castle too."

Emma wanted some clarification on Amelia's previous remark. "How could these two leaving school bring down a government?"

She attempted to explain. "Only one person emerged from that entire fiasco yesterday with any integrity, hundreds watched while tens of thousands listened to a young wizard who was ready to give up his magic rather than remain under the control of Dumbledore. Harry Potter was already a hero in our society, and that was before

people spent hours queuing to catch a glimpse of the basilisk he slew. While other images crashed and burned yesterday, Harry's heroism, dignity and sheer honesty shone brightly." Amelia could only smile as the modest young wizard's face shone red at her words.

"When the truth comes out that Voldemort is not dead, and what Dumbledore intended to do, rightly or wrongly, the wizarding public will look once more to its saviour. In that context, Harry leaving Hogwarts to go elsewhere would see that very same public lash out at a government who allowed such a thing to happen."

It was Dan's turn to ask a question, he made no attempt to disguise the anger in his voice. "Surely they don't expect Harry to deal with this problem?"

"Mr Granger, dealing with this is my problem. Currently half my department is searching for Voldemort while the other half are trying to track down Dumbledore. The old wizard's actions though would seem to place Harry at the centre of this, we'll know more once we hear this prophecy tomorrow." Again Amelia continued before anyone could interrupt.

"It is my intention to provide Harry with all the support the ministry can muster, seeing his godfather become once more a free man is only the first step in this process. Auror Tonks, would you be willing to continue your protection duties until further notice?"

Tonks immediately confirmed that she would before Amelia turned her attention to Harry. "You haven't said much, what are your thoughts on what's been spoken about here today?"

Harry had been listening carefully to everything that had been said here this morning and came to a startling conclusion. The ministry was desperate to appease him, which placed a fair amount of power in his hands. It was time to see if his conclusion was right and make a stab at using some of that power. "Madam Bones, in all our time at Hogwarts we've only ever had one competent defence teacher. This person was also a Gryffindor prefect when he attended Hogwarts, and someone we trust. Remus Lupin could solve your head of Gryffindor and defence professor problems in one go."

The others at breakfast couldn't quite believe what they were hearing but Hermione squeezing his hand below the table was enough to tell Harry she agreed with this. He pushed for more. "It would also be a condition if we were to return to Hogwarts that Hermione have a room in the same accommodation as Tonks and I. Yesterday proved she's in as much danger as me and the three of us will be safer together."

Amelia couldn't hide the wry smile at how quickly Harry had picked up on what the real situation was. He could have asked for practically anything yet his requests (demands?) were well thought out and certainly not excessive. "I agree with you totally on the Miss Granger issue and will pursue the matter of Professor Lupin returning to Hogwarts with the minister. I remember Susan's opinion on his teaching skills matched yours, publicly citing that he is a friend of yours should end any issues over his illness."

She was very impressed that Harry had quickly worked out the position he found himself in allowed him the power to make requests like this. What really impressed Amelia though was that, even with all that was going on around him, the young wizard still had time to think of others. She now had an overdue date with her bed while both Granger parents headed off to work, leaving Harry, Hermione and Tonks with the responsibility to contact Sirius Black.

The three had no sooner left than Tonks apparated to Sirius. Since he had never visited the Grangers house before, she would need to guide him home.

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The creature that was once Tom Riddle was struggling to hold its temper but it knew it must. At the moment nothing would please it more than cursing his stupid servant Wormtail until the rat couldn't scream again. His present circumstances prevented this action, which just increased his anger and frustration. His plan going so badly wrong, so very quickly left them no other option but to flee for their lives. This was responsible for most of its anger but not all.

Of course the great Lord Voldemort had another plan. If something were to go wrong, he intended to use the horecrux in the nearby Gaunt shack to once more have a body. The hapless Pettigrew would be providing the life energy needed to allow this process to

take place, which was another reason the rat couldn't be cursed into a drooling heap. Peter of course was completely unaware of what fate the dark lord had in store for him, this frail body still needed care until they could get their hands on one of his precious objects.

The catastrophic failure of his plans though also totally derailed his intended plan B. With the capture of his most faithful servant, there would now be ministry aurors all over Little Hangleton. This led to his current dilemma, he would need to choose another of his precious treasures to complete the ritual. It would clearly be too dangerous to attempt grabbing the ring now and, with the ministry aware of his presence, time was definitely of the essence. Hogwarts was also beyond his reach, as was the cup Bella had stored safely in her Gringotts vault. His rage almost got away from him as his thoughts turned to his diary, Malfoy would pay heavily for his failure.

By this process of elimination, the thing had reached the conclusion that the locket in the cave was by far his best option. With any luck, even a wizard as poor as Pettigrew should be able to get them there by tomorrow. Only these thoughts allowed him to refrain from repeatedly cursing Peter. Tomorrow there would be one less rat in the world and Lord Voldemort would rise again. He was not renowned for his patience but, on this occasion, he would embrace that seldom used trait. He would make up for his restraint tomorrow with a certain Malfoy being top of his long list.

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Lucius Malfoy was currently locked away in his study, even the glass of exquisite port in his hand couldn't prevent the shiver of fear that ran down his spine. He was between the proverbial rock and a hard place, with the slippery Slitherin trying to plot a route out of his dilemma.

His gaze swept round his favourite room in the mansion as Lucius contemplated how the years had been good to him. His wealth and power were about to come crashing down around his head though, due to the events in Hogwarts yesterday.

When their master was vanquished all those years ago, Lucius had become the defacto leader of those left behind. He'd used his position and gold to spare not only himself from Azkaban, but those who could be of use to him. His crazy sister-in-law was beyond

saving and he was actually glad to see the back of her. Bella would never have approved of him running things, or not scouring the world for their master. Lucius was a different wizard now, older, wiser and certainly a lot wealthier. That was a lot to give up so he could don a mask and torture some muggleborns again. He'd enjoyed their brief sorrie at the world cup but it wouldn't in any way compensate for losing all he held dear. If the dark lord returned there could be no doubt that Lucius would lose it all, that's assuming he was allowed to live?

His contacts inside the ministry were keeping him apprised of the situation so he knew all about their master's plan to return. This also provided the other side to his dilemma. The ministry currently had Severus Snape and Barty Crouch Jr in their custody. At the moment they were being fed truth serum and asked questions concerning Dumbledore and the dark lord. It surely wouldn't be long before the ministry saught information on death eaters, at that point his goose was cooked. Only the fact there was a maximum safe amount of truth serum that could be administered in a twenty four hour period had him sitting there drinking port and contemplating his future. Otherwise, Lucius Malfoy would be living up to a family trait and fleeing the country.

His contacts were well placed and their information guaranteed accurate, Lucius only paid for the best. The intelligence from those sources was telling him he had at most until tomorrow to come up with a scheme to save his arse from the ministry. When he factored into the equation that his master was not only still alive, but actively working to return to his former glory, there was really no other course left open to Lucius. A dignified withdrawal from Britain to Brazil should be an auspicious start. That would be quickly followed by a much more covert move to a country on the African continent, Lybia certainly had possibilities. Finally a move in total secrecy to his final destination in Asia, a man of his wealth and tastes could live well in Bancok.

He had briefly considered taking his wife with him but soon realised that would never work. With Draco still in Hogwarts, Lucius intended to be safely ensconced in his new life before school ended at summer. Narcissa was devoted to the boy and would never stand to see him abandoned. That Draco had hippogriff shit for brains along with all the subtlety of a male dragon chasing a female in heat meant that Lucius was always going to leave his disappointment of a

son behind. He really did feel bad about leaving Narcissa to face the rapidly approaching storm without a knut to her name but Lucius had needs that required gold for them to be met. If half what he heard about Bancroft was true, he was certain to have every one of those needs met there.

He would have the goblins start transferring every galleon he could lay his hands on to their Rio branch today. Lucius would then transfer the gold from there to the Gnomes of Switzerland before heading for Africa. By the time he arrived in Asia, anyone looking for him would be searching on the other side of the world.

Lucius finished his port before taking a farewell glance around his study, it was time to put his plan into action.

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Dan and Emma had managed to get cover for their practice tomorrow. They had also booked the same people for the start of next week too. If things went anywhere near as bad tomorrow as Amelia was hinting at, they wanted to be there for Hermione and Harry. They pulled into the drive and entered a house full of laughter, it would seem Harry had wasted no time in contacting his godfather. Then Hermione came rushing to introduce them.

Tonks had cut a now showered and shaved Sirius' hair before she and Hermione had done a little clothes shopping for the ex-convict. This had the dual effect of giving godfather and godson some time alone to chat, while ensuring the Grangers would have a better first impression of Sirius.

"Mum, dad, this is Sirius Black, Harry's godfather."

Sirius heartily shook Dan's hand before kissing Emma's. "I can't thank you enough for the care you've shown Harry here, it's also clear to me where Hermione takes her beauty from. His father was the same, went for the prettiest and smartest witch in Hogwarts."

A blushing but clearly excited Hermione put a stop to Sirius saying any more. "Ok Sirius, that's quite enough. Mum, dad, can we go now and see Harry's new house?"

Dan could only chuckle as the reason for Hermione's excitement was explained. "I thought Harry wanted to wait until Sirius could be there too? He won't be free to walk down the street until after tomorrow."

Hermione rolled her eyes at that. "Dad, we'll simply be taking the dog for a walk."

An astonished Dan and Emma struggled to believe their eyes as Sirius transformed into a large black dog. When Tonks slipped into her Granger cousin disguise, it was clearly time to go.

Emma thought it would be exceedingly difficult to discern who was the most excited between the two teens and the big black dog. The mutt kept bounding ahead before doubling back and trying to get a laughing Harry and Hermione to hurry up.

Her own enthusiasm was gradually being replaced with a sense of dread as Emma began to realise where they were heading. All the information they had was a street name and door number, she was becoming more certain with every footstep what they would find there.

Benjamin Taylor was the owner of a few cotton mills back in the early eighteen hundreds. Like all mill owners of the time, he made a fortune from exploiting the poor unfortunate men, woman and mostly children that worked in horrendous conditions for a pittance. The bold Benjamin took the fortune gained from his worker's sweat and ploughed it into a fine mansion for him and his family, many miles away from any mills or anyone who worked in them. There were even high walls and large iron gates to keep the 'wrong sort' from ever looking upon his home.

As has happened the world over from time immemorial, his gross exploitation was severely curtailed by social changes that belatedly swept through the country. When children aged between nine and eleven were restricted to an eight hour working day, with those under nine no longer being permitted to work, it sounded the first death knell for the British textile magnates. The smart ones started modernising their factories so they would need less workers, Benjamin Taylor wasn't one of them. He eventually lost everything except his house, which his descendants weren't likely to thank him for.

The final blow for the Taylor family came long after Benjamin had popped his clogs and headed for that great mill in the sky. As well as the house, they apparently also inherited Benjamin's shortsightedness. While other mansion owners around them were selling off their too large homes, the Grangers own house being merely one of many built on the grounds of these former mansions, the Taylor's dithered until it was too late. Apart from the crippling costs of running and maintaining a building of that age/size, English Heritage then declared the building as grade two listed. This meant that they couldn't knock it down and sell the four acres of prime land it sat on, and also that very few people would take it on with the severe conditions and restrictions that came attached with that listing.

Emma could well understand blocking a prospective owner from covering beautiful, natural stone with something as crass as pebble dash, or replacing the gorgeous Georgian windows with white PVC double glazing, but leaving the grand old house derelict until it was beyond saving was a crime she could never support. The old Taylor place had been unoccupied her entire life, slowly decaying toward the point where it could be declared condemned. Finally allowing it to be legally demolished and the land becoming available to sell for development.

Unfortunately for old Benjamin's descendants, the one thing he did properly in his entire life was ensuring his home was built to a high specification. This was also the main reason English Heritage listed the building as it was such a fine example of the period. It could be another fifty years though before it reached the stage where the same English Heritage would consider it beyond salvage.

The practical side of the dentist would never get her head around the fact that many such buildings up and down the country were in the same catch twenty two situation. They wouldn't survive without someone lavishing lots of cash and TLC on them but the local planners were required by law to apply the restrictions handed down from English Heritage. The very laws designed supposedly to save these listed buildings of architectural importance were the main reason hundreds of them were in this position.

What was really making her blood boil though was that some unscrupulous person had sold this to a man who was on the run and

living in a cave. Sirius and Harry already had so many disappointments in their lives, they certainly didn't need any more. The blow would be even more severe considering how excited they were. Emma didn't think she was stretching the truth any to say that living with his godfather, in a house only a ten minute walk from Hermione's, would be a dream come true for the young man. If Emma ever got the person responsible for bringing those dreams crashing down to earth in her chair, they would soon discover why it was a very bad idea to piss off a dentist.

Emma was so caught up in her visions of revenge, they arrived at their destination before she realised it. Part of her was dismayed to discover that it was indeed the old Taylor place but what was in front of her was offering a glimmer of hope.

Since she was a little girl, the wrot iron gates had been held firmly closed by a massive iron chain and padlock, the gates themselves covered in 'keep out' warnings. These gates looked as if they left the blacksmith's yesterday, and the square stone pillars that supported them either side appeared pristine. It was the figures atop these pillars Emma had no previous memory of. Each had a sitting male lion with a front paw regally raised onto a circular shield that displayed a family crest. She recognised the Potter one immediately, both Harry and Hermione had it emblazoned on their school robes, and assumed the other one was for the Black family.

Both teens easily swung the well oiled gates open and raced up the curving drive with Padfoot, leaving Emma standing there with her jaw almost on the street. The grounds could hardly be called 'manicured' but, considering they easily passed for a jungle before, they were now in amazing condition. That was nothing though compared to her first sight of the house, it was simply beautiful. She wanted time to study the exterior in more detail but Dan and Tonks were getting caught up in the enthusiasm pouring off the other three and were desperate to see inside the house. She did have a question though that simply couldn't wait. "How is this possible?"

Tonks reply of 'magic' saw Emma come straight back at her. "I can work that out for myself, and so will anyone else who sees this. I thought magic was supposed to be kept a secret?"

"There are mild muggle repelling charms all around the property, no one else will notice anything."

Emma had another question though. "If there are those charms around to keep muggles out, how are Dan and I able to walk in here?"

Tonks was smiling back at the woman she was quickly becoming to regard as a friend. "I saw you looking at the crests at the gate pillars, the Black and Potter families will always be welcome here. That ring on Hermione's finger makes you part of the Potter family."

Hermione's impatient pleading got them moving again. "Mum, would you hurry up. Harry's refusing to open the door until we're all here."

They moved up the steps, through the carved stone columns that supported the grand porch in time to see Harry's hand shaking with excitement as he tried to fit the key into the lock. The door swung open to reveal a grand entrance hall that boasted a pair of curving staircases, it was the pair of little creatures there to greet them that drew all the attention though.

"Dobby and Winky would like to welcome their families to their new home." Both elves appeared so smart, proudly wearing their little robes with the appropriate family crest on them.

Hermione was also aware this house was formerly derelict and was so impressed at the work they had done. "Did you two do all this yourselves?"

Dobby shook his head. "When the other elves at Hogwarts discovered what Dobby and Winky were doing, they all wanted to help clean the great Harry Potter's house. Harry Potter cleaned the castle of the giant snake, they wanted to repay him."

Winky though had her head down. "The house is not finished yet..."

She never got to say anymore as both elves found themselves being hugged by delighted teens. Sirius had transformed back and was slowly looking around the place. "You guys have done magnificent work here, this is brilliant."

Winky was actually blushing as she asked the next question. "Will you want to stay here for dinner?"

Even the elves could tell Emma's answer came straight from the heart. "Winky, I might never want to leave here again. Can you show us around the house?"

Both elves took great delight in showing their family around what would soon be home to almost all of them. Emma was so wishing she had thought to bring her camera before remembering she could come back here anytime, it was only a ten minute walk between the houses.

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The entire house, led by Ginny, kept the pressure on Ron to send Pig with a message for Harry and Hermione. All of Gryffindor were desperate to know how they were, and whether they planned to return now Dumbledore was gone. Continually pointing out that he was their best friend, so the letter really had to come from him, was not helping their case.

Ron was hurt that his supposed best friends couldn't even hint at what they were planning, far less tell him. All Harry would say was that he had the egg well and truly beaten and a plan in place to deal with the task. His only consolation was that he obviously hadn't told any of his new friends, the other champions, either.

This consolation though was completely swamped by what happened at the end. The entire school watched, while the rest of the country listened, as Victor Krum shook Harry's hand and said that was the bravest thing he'd ever seen. Ron was aware he had a problem with jealousy but the green eyed monster had consumed him at that point. He would give his left nut for Victor Krum to shake his hand, far less make a public comment like that.

There was also the problem of what he was supposed to write. Ron didn't think 'Hey mate, Cannons lost again last night and thanks for getting rid of Snape. When are you coming back?' would cut it. He also wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer to the question.

Ron was beginning to think he was better off when no one in the house was talking to him, at least he wasn't having to do all those detentions McGonagall had hit him with. Unfortunately, that meant having to spend more time in Gryffindor tower. Why could he never catch a break?

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Padfoot stayed close to Harry, and Tonks wearing her official auror robes saw them quickly reach Amelia's office. It was only on arrival there that Sirius Black made an appearance. The head of the DMLE was so surprised, her monocle slipped off her face.

"Can I assume the mystery of how Sirius Black escaped Azkaban, and evaded capture, has just been solved?" She really didn't expect an answer though a few wide grins told her she'd hit the bullseye.

"We have a panel of five judges who have heard the testimony from both Crouchs, their actual trials have been set for Monday. What we want to do here today is administer some truth serum to discover exactly how you ended up at Azkaban."

Harry quietly growled two names, everyone in the large office still clearly heard "Crouch and Dumbledore." There wasn't one person there who dissagreed with that assesment.

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The Prophet was once more full of Harry Potter, and Molly was once more in tears. The front page picture of Harry and Hermione wrapped in their blankets as they left Hogwarts under auror guard had a really haunting quality to it. The paper also asked the question, 'Will this be the last time we see Harry Potter?' which was what had set Molly off again. She'd been doing a lot of crying recently.

Molly had publicly made a fool of herself, and also hurt someone she was very fond of. She now realised that sending a howler to Hermione was a bad mistake, and the follow-up one to Harry just compounded the original error. Discovering they had become betrothed at Christmas highlighted this error in a manner that even she couldn't miss.

She and Arthur had also queued for two and a half hours to see the basilisk that had almost cost them their only daughter. One glance and she had to be led away sobbing at how much they actually owed the young wizard responsible for saving their precious little girl. What was really eating away at her was how she had then repaid

this act of heroism, publicly declaring he was no longer welcome in her house ever again.

Now to discover what the young man was going through at the time just added to her remorse, why couldn't she learn not to go sticking her nose in where it wasn't wanted? Molly now found herself in a similar predicament to her youngest son. She desperately wanted to begin mending her relationship with Harry but hadn't a clue where to start. She would have to talk to Arthur again tonight, hopefully he would have some ideas. Whatever way she looked at it, the only pie she would be eating in the near future was of the humble variety.

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Their morning at the ministry had been going swimmingly. It had taken less than an hour to declare Sirius innocent of any crimes regarding the Potter's deaths or the muggle casualties. Harry was tempted to mention that this should have been done over a decade ago but settled for having Sirius free now. The news was being broadcast all over Britain with even the muggle media being handed the story of wrongful imprisonment.

Then they had headed down to the department of mysteries where Harry picked up the glass orb, the group also picked up their 'friend' who spoke to them down in Slytherin's chamber. It was back in Amelia's office that it all went pear shaped as Harry broke the orb.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies ..."

Hermione and Emma weren't the only two writing it down, both were also staring at what their notepads now held. It was the younger Granger though who spoke first.

"This doesn't make any sense Harry. If you are the one to end Voldemort, using this mysterious power, why the hell weren't you spending all your time working on this? I hardly think sleeping

through history of magic is going to prepare you to face Voldemort unless... Oh shit! Oh shit! That utter bastard."

She felt Harry's hand slip into hers. "Perhaps you would care to explain to those of us who are not geniuses just what you figured out?"

Hermione hated to be the one to say this but it had to be done. It all fitted and she was sure she was right. "Either must die at the hand of the other... this means that only you can kill Voldemort."

There was silence as Harry had to coax the next bit from his betrothed. "Even I figured that bit out Hermione, what's got you so upset?"

"It also means that only Voldemort can kill you. That leads me to believe that all those times you ran into him at Hogwarts were anything but mere coincidences. First year, Dumbledore brings the stone to the castle and employs Quirrell. A mere coincidence Hagrid picked up the stone the day he took you to Gringotts? Second year, no one knows a giant basilisk is roaming the school? I wonder if Sirius escaping ruined his plans for third year and we all know what happened this year."

Harry could see both Amelia and the unspeakable got what Hermione was implying but he needed it spelt out to him. "Hermione, please?"

The tears were now streaming down her face as she did indeed spell it out for him. "If Voldemort was ever successful and actually managed to get the better of you, the prophecy would then be fulfilled. This would then open the way for someone else to finish off Voldemort."

Harry could see it all now as plain as day. "Someone else being a wizard with a ridiculously long beard and hideous robes? He appoints really bad defence professors to ensure I don't learn anything while creating opportunities for Voldemort to get to me. No wonder he got rid of Remus, me casting a patronus must have been as big a shock to him as it was to those dementors."

The evidence already amassed against Dumbledore meant that no one in the room had any trouble believing the hypothesis that

Hermione had arrived at. Even though Emma understood where her daughter was coming from, she still had a question. "Why did he try so hard for Harry to keep his magic? Surely this Voldemort would have an easier time if Harry couldn't magically fight back?"

"To fight me, he would have to know where I was. I planned to leave the Dursleys as quickly as possible and was definitely changing my school, hopefully then on to college. Madam Bones, could you have easily found me?"

"I have a few aurors like Tonks here who have a good understanding of the muggle world, I think we would have found you eventually. These are resources though that Voldemort doesn't have. A muggle background would be a death sentence for one of his followers..."

Amelia was interrupted by a piercing scream of absolute agony from Harry, only Sirius standing so close to him allowed his godfather to help the now thrashing young wizard to the floor. There was no doubt just where this pain was emanating from, the blood leaking out that famous scar on his forehead was a dead giveaway.

Emma needed Dan's arms around her as they watched their daughter cradle Harry's head in her lap. Hermione was now sitting on the floor with Harry while Sirius and Tonks attempted to stop him hurting himself as he thrashed about. The mysterious man was casting charms at Harry's forehead and everyone appeared relieved when Amelia moved away from the fireplace so the healer could step through. Hopefully they would get to the bottom of this quickly, Harry was obviously in severe pain.

A/N Thanks for reading

Chapter 12

Albus could see why everyone was jumping to the conclusion he was some kind of covert dark lord, still didn't mean he had to like the idea though. He supposed it would make his eventual victory all the sweeter, it remained to be seen whether Minerva and Severus would ever forgive him after being forced to spend some time in Azkaban.

When the wizarding public discovered that not only was Voldemort still amongst them, he always would be until the Potter boy was dead, Albus expected he and his friends to be hailed as heroes for having the courage to act on that information. It was one thing to hold strong moral opinions against their actions, those self same morals would soon disappear when it was their family's lives that were in deadly jeopardy from a returning Lord Voldemort. The opinion of the British wizarding public was as fickle as the country's weather, Albus though could forecast with a fair degree of certainty that they would quickly be calling for the Potter boy's head in order to see an end to the dark lord.

There were actually two things stopping him approaching the minister with this vital information. Albus had a life long aversion to passing on knowledge he considered too important to be known by others and also the fact that the ministry was about as secure as a fair maiden's virtue in a brothel. Albus hated admitting his shortcomings, even to himself, but he just didn't know how many horcruxes Tom had created. He daren't let the fact that he knew about them make its way back to Voldemort, that particular information leaking could spell disaster.

He needed to be able to operate without the restrictions the prophecy placed him under, yet that would only happen after Harry Potter met his demise at the hands of Voldemort. The boy's name being entered in the tournament was an obvious attempt to do that very thing. Albus though remembered Tom Riddle from his Hogwarts days and knew he was a resourceful young man, there was bound to be a back-up plan swinging into effect about now.

With Voldemort back and Potter gone, Albus would be able to walk right into the ministry and write his own terms for saving their arses. He was confident that would all take place before this summer was

over, Albus just hoped Minerva and Severus could hold out in Azkaban until then.

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Harry awoke slowly, feeling as if one side of his body was numb. The reason for this was soon apparent, as he didn't require his glasses to recognise Hermione. Even although his new bed was massive, she was attached to his side like a limpet. His slight movement though alerted her to his awakening and soon his vision was full of bushy brown hair. A tender kiss later and she was putting his glasses back on him.

"You frightened the life out of us Harry, was Voldemort responsible for that?"

Harry drew her into a hug to quell the shudders that racked his body from the mere thought of what he had seen. Thanks to the addition of his glasses, Harry now confirmed he was in his own room at their new house. While he was wearing pyjamas and tucked under the covers, Hermione was fully clothed and lying on top so neither felt the need to jump apart as Sirius entered the room.

"Hey kiddo, how are you feeling?"

"Like Dudley and his gang kicked the shit out of me. How long have I been here?"

"Once you stopped convulsing, the healer from St Mungo's administered a small dose of dreamless sleep potion. It's just after six in the evening. You feel up to talking about it?"

"No, but I need to. I only want to do it the once though so could we get everyone to gather here?"

Hermione was lying in his arms and could easily have stayed there for the rest of her life, her concern for Harry though made her speak out. "Don't you want to get up for a little while, maybe have a bite to eat?"

"Hermione, after you hear what I have to say, dinner will be the last thing on your mind."

Picking up some idea of how bad this might be, Sirius made a suggestion. "Do you think we should invite Madam Bones to hear this?"

Harry's answer of 'Definitely' had Sirius really concerned, he left the two teens so he could make the arrangements.

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Amelia was being led toward the stunning house by Tonks but her mind wasn't thinking about architecture at the moment. She had some really bad news to pass on to these good people and had no idea how it would be perceived. As head of the DMLE, the part of the job she detested with a passion was having to pass bad news on to surviving relatives. This though had the potential to surpass that hated task by quite a magnitude.

She followed her young auror up the staircase into a first floor bedroom where the rest of the family had gathered. Harry still looked very pale, the white bandage around his head just adding to the effect. His betrothed was sitting on the bed beside him and Amelia wouldn't be surprised in the slightest if the witch hadn't let go of Harry since earlier in the ministry. There were a few sofas and chairs tastefully scattered about the large room that Sirius then placed around the huge bed, Amelia sat as the newly exonerated wizard explained what was going on here.

"Harry is about to tell us what happened today and thought you should be here. He doesn't want to tell it more than once so none of us know what happened yet."

Amelia nodded and awaited Harry's explanation, anything that delayed the news she had to deliver was welcome.

Harry kept a tight hold of Hermione's hand as he began. "The thing that used to be Voldemort was in some kind of underground cavern. I never got to see the outside so have no idea where it is. Peter was there, and Voldemort's snake Nagini."

Hermione offered him a drink but Harry fervently shook his head. "They were on a small rocky island in the middle of an underground pond, a little boat was tied off so I guess that's how they got there. Voldemort was forcing Peter to drink a clear liquid out of something

resembling a church font. It was obviously not plain water because it was driving Peter nuts. He was sobbing while rambling on about James and Lily, Voldemort had to use an imperius curse to force the rat into drinking it all. When Peter then handed him a necklace from inside the font, all hell broke loose."

Even with the images of Peter being forced to drink that potion fresh in his mind, Harry needed a sip of water from Hermione before he could carry on. "When Voldemort saw the necklace, he was so angry he fired a curse that nearly brought the roof of the cavern down on top of them. He also forgot about Peter."

His shudder had Hermione once more lying beside him, holding on tight. Harry glanced toward his godfather before continuing. "Whatever revenge you may have dreamed up for Pettigrew, it could never be as bad as the way he met his end. That potion must have left him very thirsty because he crawled to the water and began lapping it up like the rat he was. He'd only been there a few seconds when a hand shot out the water and grabbed him by the throat."

Harry needed another drink because his own throat was now incredibly dry. "The arm had a body attached to it, and that body brought along a good number of his mates. Pettigrew was struggling like mad as they made their way out the water and headed straight for him. The nearest description I could give would be that of a zombie. They had certainly been human once and were clearly not anymore. They started tearing Peter to shreds with their long fingernails, and even their teeth."

Hermione had to remove the glass of water from his hand, Harry was shaking so much he would have spilled it. No one else moved, Harry's story had transported them all to the terror that was the underground cavern. "Voldemort had by then realised what was happening and started throwing some kind of flame curses around. It forced the creatures back into the water but they were dragging a still screaming and struggling bloody Peter Pettigrew with them. It was only when they grabbed his snake that Voldemort realised he was surrounded by the creatures. He couldn't save the snake either."

He paused for a moment, trying to steel himself for the last bit. The horror of what he had experienced was now sinking in to everyone in the room. They couldn't imagine how it could get any worse but

Harry's demeanour was clearly indicating that it did. "Voldemort knew it was hopeless. Without Pettigrew he had no way out off there, or anyone to care for him if he did make it. Nagini being slaughtered also meant she wouldn't be able to feed him. His rage was awesome and he took many of those things with him but it was always going to end only one way."

His voice was now muffled as he was clinging on to Hermione as if his life depended on it. The listeners though still caught every word, and the sheer terror they contained. "His cobbled together body couldn't possibly maintain that level of magic use for very long, when the first one managed to grab him that was the beginning of the end. Voldemort was still alive when they began to eat him."

Hermione wasn't the only person in the room now in tears at what Harry had to endure, she was the only person holding Harry though and attempted to keep it together to help him through this. Harry had told her that during these dreams/visions it was as if he was the snake or Voldemort. No wonder he was still shaking, Harry must have felt as if he was being eaten alive.

Dan was the one to break the silence that followed Harry's final revelation. He had an arm comfortingly around his crying wife while struggling to make sense of what he just heard. "Does this mean Voldemort is gone?"

It was actually Harry who tried to answer him. "I don't think so. It felt like when Quirrell died at the end of our first year. He was using another body that time too. It died but he didn't and something tells me this is the same again. Just don't ask me to explain it."

This was the best opening Amelia was going to get so she grasped the opportunity. "Perhaps I can explain it, though I have to emphasise this information is classed as most secret. It can't leave this room."

If Amelia had an explanation, they all wanted to hear it and quickly agreed to keep the secret. She then removed an old book that everyone but Sirius had seen before, Tom Riddle's diary.

"We are now certain this diary was once a horcrux. A horcrux is..."

"Some of the darkest magic known. You create one using a ritual that requires the person to commit murder, a piece of their soul is detached and embedded into an object. The person then cannot die as long as this horcrux exists." It was obvious to everyone Hermione was quoting verbatim from something she'd read, Amelia though demanded to know where she got this information.

"It was only a few paragraphs in a book I was reading about soul magic. It had no information on how to create one though did offer a few suggestions for destroying them. It offered a dementor's kiss or hitting the object with the killing curse as means of disposal. Funnily enough, ripping the fang out a one thousand year old Basilisk and stabbing the horcrux with it never rated a mention."

Harry almost managed a smile. "If you give up on being a stand-up comic, I'll leave the cooking as a hobby. Do we have a deal?"

Dan felt as if he still didn't understand what was going on here. "Are you saying this Voldemort person can't be killed, even by Harry? Isn't that horcrux thing destroyed?"

Amelia had promised them honesty and now it was time to deliver. "Voldemort can't be killed for good while a horcrux still exists. Yes this one is destroyed which can only lead to the conclusion that he made more than one."

While this was sinking in, Amelia then dropped the real bombshell. "I was extremely concerned on hearing Harry had this connection to Voldemort and asked my colleague from the unspeakables if he would carry out some tests on Harry. We of course were going to ask your permission but we all know what happened in my office. He cast the charms while Harry was thrashing about and I'm afraid it's bad news. There is a piece of Voldemort's soul residing behind Harry's scar."

Hermione's wand shot off the bedside table and straight into her hand, it was pointed directly at the head of the DMLE. She wasn't confident enough against such an opponent though so called for back-up. Dobby was there the instant Hermione spoke his name.

She gave the little elf his instructions but her eyes and wand never waivered from Amelia. "Dobby, this is an order. If anyone from the ministry tries to take Harry or harm him, get Harry away from here."

Dobby quickly nodded and stood ready to comply.

Amelia slowly and carefully lifted her hands so Hermione could see they were empty, the girl might still be young but her rage saw the power almost crackle like electricity from the witch. Tonks had her wand out too, but Amelia wouldn't like to bet where the auror's loyalties lay in this situation. It was time to take command. "Auror Tonks, please take my wand and sit it over beside Harry. Miss Granger, please remember I am not Albus Dumbledore."

Sirius clearly sided with the teens that were still on the bed. Dan though felt the more information he got, the more confused he became. "Hermione love, what's the problem here?"

Even as she answered her father, she still never let up on covering Amelia. "Neither can live while the other survives. Now we know why Dumbledore wanted Voldemort to kill Harry, the old bastard probably thought it was poetic justice. He can't be vanquished while Harry still has that horcrux in his head, Voldemort would be killing a piece of himself at the same time. Tell me Madam Bones, what plans do you have for getting this thing out of Harry without killing him?"

She felt Harry's hand reach over and slowly push her wand arm down. "This is not the way Hermione, Madam Bones has been a friend to us since we first met her. I would certainly like to hear the answer to that question though."

"I promised I would tell the truth and that's what I intend to do. At the moment, only one other person outside these four walls knows about this. He's currently searching through every piece of literature the ministry has that mentions these things. Miss Granger's hypothesis about Dumbledore is surely correct and, thanks to her insight, we will be searching his office for any materials on the subject in the very near future. May we borrow the book on soul magic you read that in?"

"The book mainly focused on another type of soul magic, that was just... Tonks, mum, I need to speak with you both." She turned to Harry and gave him a quick kiss. "You stay here, we won't be long."

Harry easily recognised what he would call Hermione's 'head to the library' moment. He could only smile as she jumped off the bed.

Hermione wasn't smiling though as she spoke to Dobby on the way out. "My order still stands Dobby, keep Harry safe."

The little elf practically saluted. "Yes Mistress Mione, you can count on Dobby." If there was one order Dobby would be sure to follow to the best of his abilities, it would be keeping Harry Potter safe.

As the three ladies left, Sirius looked to Harry for an explanation. "Hermione just thought of something but isn't sure enough of her facts to tell us yet. Normally she would be heading for the library but we haven't had time to set that up. She'll let us all know shortly."

Dan was shaking his head. "It amazes me just how well you two can read each other, Hermione was ready to do battle and you calmed her down with a few words. I'm also amazed at how well you're taking this horcrux news, I think I would be going nuts about now."

Harry considered Dan's point for a moment before answering. "A part of me is terrified while another is relieved that we can put a name to what this is. Does that make sense?" He received a nod from Sirius, Amelia and Dan before continuing.

"We also have Madam Bones and an unspeakable in our corner fighting for us, and a family to fall back on. That puts us way ahead of where we normally are in these situations. Dumbledore is undoubtedly a brilliant man but once he makes his mind up about something, nothing can change it. That's why I was sent back to the Dursleys every summer, and why he kept trying to arrange my death. He couldn't see any other option but now there are some very good people looking for one."

"Harry, I give you my word that we will do everything in our power to get that thing out of there without harming you. My friend in the unspeakables thinks that, if he got his hands on a horcrux, he could use it to help track down any others. As we've seen from your scar, they are all connected in some way. He reckons that one could be used to track down the rest. What can you tell us about that necklace?"

"Oh, did I say it was a locket, and that there was a note inside?" The glances from the other occupants of his bedroom clearly told Harry that, not only did he not mention these facts, he should continue with the rest of the story as soon as possible. "A death eater had discovered what Voldemort was up to and swapped lockets. He expected to pay for this with his life but hoped it would help bring Voldemort down. It was signed R.A.B."

Sirius was on his feet instantly with a cry of "What did you just say?" He made a lunge toward Harry, only to find an empty bed. Dobby had protected his master.

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Hermione led her mother and Tonks into her bedroom, shutting the door before speaking. "Tonks, what do you know about soul bond rituals?"

"Ah, the mystery of why you were reading about that type of magic is solved. I think you are a bit young to be considering a step like that."

"And I think Harry's far too young to die. Do you know anything about them?"

"Only that they fell out of favour many decades ago. With both participants having to swear they would be faithful to each other for the rest of their lives, and also the couple have to be virgins, you can see why this died out among the pureblood males."

"So far nothing you have said seems like a negative to me?"

"What about having to lose your virginity during the ritual?"

Hermione was trying not to blush, and deliberately not looking at her mother at this point. "It was always going to be Harry, this would just move the timetable up."

"Ok, I can understand that but what if the bond isn't powerful enough to push the horcrux out? I'm assuming that's the aim here?"

"Of course that's the aim. When I first read it, I thought that was the kind of relationship every girl dreams off. With the situation we're in now, this may be a way out for us."

"In theory, yes. I really don't know enough about it, I think you are going to have to talk to Madam Bones' friend in the unspeakables."

Hermione was now smiling. "I just wanted to know if you thought it was possible before I mentioned it."

"I assume you are now going to tell me just what you both are talking about?"

"Mum, Harry has a bit of Voldemort's soul behind his scar, and we need to get it out." Emma nodded that at least that much she understood. "The book I was reading had rituals where a couple could literally join their souls, magic and everything else that we are. It goes so much further than a simple marriage. My hope is that this bond would force that thing out of Harry. Nothing can come between a soul bound couple, our magic simply wouldn't allow it."

"And for this ritual to work, you have to lose your virginity? I'm assuming during sex with Harry?"

This time Hermione looked her mother directly in the eyes. "Yes mother."

Emma couldn't mistake the determination shown there, she asked the question the mother in her wasn't sure if she wanted to know the answer to. "Do you have some kind of schedule in mind for performing this ritual?"

"Well, when I first read of this ritual, I thought my coming of age would be the perfect time..."

Hermione's room wasn't just as big as Harry's, it still contained a sofa and two chairs as part of its furnishings. It was into one of these chairs a mightily relieved Emma Granger sank. "Oh thank god for that. For a minute there I had this terrible vision of explaining to your father this was happening next week. Since you'll then be seventeen, he doesn't even need to know anything about it."

Hermione's gaze was now locked on her mother. "As I was saying, that was my original thoughts, or dreams would be a more accurate description. Now we know about this thing in Harry's head, I really think it should be sooner rather than later."

Emma was trying to gather her thoughts after that electrifying news. While she was delighted Hermione trusted her enough to have this discussion, the mother in her was screaming that her baby wasn't ready for this step yet. How to put that across without starting a war would call on all her parenting skills. Hermione's reaction to Amelia's revelation hadn't shocked Emma, she'd come to recognise the deep feelings the couple had for each other.

"Hermione, your father and I really like your choice of boyfriend, we're even happy with the betrothal part of your relationship. This though seems like a step too far, too quickly. Surely what we just heard about this Voldemort gives you more time? You'll need to explain to me the need for this to be rushed into before I could even consider thinking about it, never mind offering my blessing."

Hermione gave a genuine smile at that. Her mother would hear her out, she really couldn't ask for any more than that at the moment. She needed her mum on board to help convince her dad, the task of persuading Harry this was a good idea fell to her and would probably be every bit as difficult, especially if the process proved to be dangerous to one Hermione Granger.

"The reason I had my wand on Madam Bones is because I think the ministry and Dumbledore are a bigger threat to Harry at the moment than Voldemort. Harry's right to trust her but, if it became public knowledge he had to die to be rid of Voldemort his life wouldn't be worth a Knut. Dumbledore knows all this and may just decide to go public in the hope of keeping Snape and McGonagall out of Azkaban."

Emma was aghast at even the thought this could be true, she looked toward Tonks and only found confirmation coming from the auror.

"Minister Fudge will always go with the popular opinion, and the public believe everything they are told. We would be forced to flee the country and hide for the rest of our lives."

Neither Granger girl missed Tonks use of the word 'we', the auror was clearly placing the safety of the young couple before any loyalty to her job.

Emma stood and held both her daughter's hands in her own, she needed the contact for her next question. "Hermione, are you sure you're both ready to take this relationship to the next level? This is not something that can be taken back."

Emma saw vulnerability in her daughter for the first time. "I love Harry mum and think he loves me, I already know he's the one for me."

"Hermione, I don't think there is any doubt how Harry feels about you. That at least is one thing you don't have to worry about."

Tonks hated to interrupt this tender mother/daughter moment but had a piece of information that she thought needed mentioning. "What you might not know is, should these two go through with this and pull it off, they would be married in the eyes of the magical world. Your daughter would eventually be Lady Hermione Potter, wife of Lord Potter."

Neither Emma nor Tonks missed the glow in Hermione's eyes at the mere thought of that. The also heard her whispered reply. "Now all I have to do is convince Harry."

At that, there was a loud pop and Harry appeared in Hermione's bed. Emma just couldn't resist teasing her daughter. "Looks like that won't be as big a problem as you thought."

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"What the hell are you playing at Sirius?"

"In a minute Dan, we need to find where Dobby took Harry. Winky."

The little elf appeared with a scowl on her face.

"Winky, do you know where Dobby took Harry?"

"Yes."

That Winky offered no further explanation was a clear indication to Sirius just how big a mess he'd made of things. She only answered what her bond to the Black family forced her to, this was not the way he wanted to continue. Sirius knelt down to be closer in height to the little elf. "Winky, I love my godson and would never harm him. Harry just gave me the biggest shock of my life and I need to find him. Will you help me?"

All three could see Winky thinking before answering. "Dobby took him to where he would be safe, beside Mistress Mione. They are in her bedroom."

A relieved Sirius thanked his elf before standing, Amelia had retrieved her wand and stored it away inside her robes. "I'm assuming that if we follow you, there will be an explanation?"

Dan couldn't resist adding his tuppence worth. "You'd better come anyway Amelia, Sirius here might be the one requiring a bodyguard, from Hermione."

Sirius wasn't really listening, he shot out the door to find his godson. The sound of female laughter emanating from Hermione's room was certainly unexpected and slowed Sirius down enough to let the other two catch up. He knocked and opened the door to find a blushing Hermione, while Emma and Tonks were in kinks of laughter at her discomfort. Sirius though had his gaze locked onto Harry, and the loyal little elf at his side.

"Dobby, thank you for such quick action regarding Harry but I was only going to ask him some questions. R.A.B. could be my younger brother Regulus. Our whole world thinks he died a death eater, this might change everything."

"I'm sorry Sirius, the letter mentioned destroying the horcrux but not much else."

The auror in Amelia needed to see the proof. "Do you have any idea where your brother might have placed such a thing?"

Sirius was considering nothing else, this would be like getting his brother back. To know Regulus died fighting Voldemort would do wonders for his soul. He called again for Winky.

"When you were getting items out my family property, was there another elf there?"

"Yes master Sirius, he knew Winky was also a Black elf but still called Winky terrible names. He stopped when Dobby banished him into a wall. He leaves Winky alone after that." No one missed Winky's blush, or sly glance in Dobby's direction.

When Sirius called for Kreacher, the elf was duty bound to obey the head of the Black family. Kreacher though could still display his displeasure and was all set to do so before spotting Dobby. He had no wish to cross that powerful young elf again. "What can Kreacher do for the head of the Black family?"

Watching Dobby stand there ready to protect his master triggered memories of another elf who was devoted to a black haired boy, Regulus had been Kreacher's favourite by quite a margin. Remembering this tempered the way Sirius approached the old elf. "Kreacher, do you know anything about a locket my brother might have taken from the dark lord?"

Any semblance of resistance left the dirty and dishevelled elf, fat tears began to leave clean tracks down his wrinkled cheeks. "Master Regulus wouldn't let Kreacher save him. When those things came out of the water, he ordered Kreacher away."

The thought of his young brother meeting the same end Harry had described for Pettigrew had tears in the corners of Sirius' eyes too, he wasn't the only one. "What about the locket Kreacher, was it destroyed?"

The ancient elf's body was now racked with sobs. "Kreacher is a bad elf, he couldn't carry out Master Regulus' last orders. The magic was too powerful for Kreacher, Kreacher couldn't destroy it."

Amelia handed Sirius the diary and he caught on at once. "Kreacher, we know how to destroy it. This book held the same dark magic and my godson destroyed it. If you bring the locket here, I give you my word it will be destroyed. Master Regulus will be avenged."

That was a concept Kreacher was well acquainted with, he was after all a Black elf. Sirius was now head of the Black family and offering

to remove the stain of failure from Kreacher, he popped out of there at once.

There wasn't really time to say anything else before the elf returned and presented Sirius with the locket. Amelia offered an evidence bag and it was quickly bagged and tagged.

Kreacher was looking around the room, noticing the muggleness of it. "Will Master Sirius be staying here?"

"I will be living here with my godson for now, I assume you will be taking good care of the Black ancestral home, and yourself?"

Kreacher stood just that little bit straighter. "Kreacher will have the home ready for when Master Sirius visits."

"Would Kreacher like some help?"

His old eyes looked at the young female elf, wearing a robe with the Black crest proudly and prominently displayed. "Kreacher would like that."

"Dobby and Winky will pop in to help clean, once we have our home the way we want it."

Sirius wasn't alone in being moved by Winky's offer of aid, nor did he miss the fact that both elves clearly thought of this as home. Kreacher nodded toward Sirius before popping out of there and heading back to London.

Sirius handed the bag to Amelia. "You better take this, I hope your unspeakable friend knows what he's doing?"

Amelia accepted the locket from Sirius with an expression that seemed equal parts excitement and horror. Excitement that they might finally be able to end Voldemort once and for all, and horror that someone had to be murdered to produce this.

"Croaker is the best. If he thinks this can be used to track these things down then their days are numbered. Don't you worry Harry, we'll be working on getting that out of you too. Now that I know Voldemort is banished, I can move more aurors over to the hunt for Dumbledore. Sirius, I'm sorry but trying to clear your brother's name

at the moment might give information to our enemies. When this is all over though..."

Sirius nodded in understanding, nothing else needed to be said. Regulus was no death eater, that was enough for him.

Hermione actually felt sick at the sight of the locket. Until the horcrux was out of Harry, every single one of these discovered put his life in greater danger. If they determined that Harry was the last remaining horcrux, no government in the world would stand back and let him live a normal life. The needs of the many would outweigh the needs of the one. Hermione removed a slim volume from one of the three bookcases in her room. "Madam Bones, this is the book I read about horcruxes in, it..."

"It's ok Hermione, I'll get Madam Bones up to speed as I see her out."

Both Granger girls were grateful to Tonks for interceding, neither were looking forward to the anticipated response of the men to Hermione's plan. Emma had also recognised that the discovery of the locket slashed any time they had for planning. If word came back that the ritual would actually work, and they couldn't come up with another safe method to get that abomination out of Harry's head, Emma knew it would fall to her to convince Dan this was the right thing to do.

She knew her daughter well enough to know Hermione would consider this a small price to pay in saving Harry's life. She was also smart enough to know that if any government could end a war by killing one person, they would take the shot. She watched as her daughter return to Harry and snuggle into her boyfriend, bringing comfort to both of them. On the one hand it was adorable, knowing what was in front of them though Emma couldn't help but think the next few days would be just as fraught as those just passed. She could only hope her family came through this stronger, and a little larger. She would have to make sure Hermione knew about all the forms of birth control available.

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Croaker was delighted with the horcrux Amelia brought him, but even more so at the story she told. "Perhaps now you will

understand why we are so interested in these two? I spent all day researching ways to get that thing out the lad and came up with nothing. Miss Granger not only quickly realises what the ministry's reaction to this news would be, she discovers a method that might just be our only viable alternative. She and Mr Potter really do make quite the team, it's such a pity Dumbledore got his hooks into Harry's parents first."

"You actually think this idea will work?"

"If any couple could pull it off at such a young age, it would be those two. Mr Potter is also the only person capable of having the power to push that thing out of him. Knowing that if he doesn't, it will spell disaster for Miss Granger too, I would bet my life on the result."

"It will be their lives riding on this, there can be no mistakes here."

The unspeakable nodded his agreement. "This book provides us with a starting point, I'm sure there are more detailed texts in our library. I will of course keep looking for alternative methods but don't hold out much hope. I think we must assume Dumbledore spent years searching for a way to get that out the lad, eventually deciding Harry had to die to complete the prophecy. We'll know more when we go through his office at Hogwarts tomorrow."

Amelia had a question that had been troubling her ever since she heard this idea from Tonks. "How will this fit with the prophecy Dumbledore put so much faith in?"

"Well, who's to say the prophecy wasn't fulfilled that Halloween?" The unspeakable thought for a few moments before offering an alternative suggestion. "If we left the horcrux in Harry until last, that would definitely fit the prophecy. The power the dark lord didn't know would be love, I'm sure you'll agree that's not something Voldemort was overly familiar with."

This threw up another question for Amelia. "How will you know when Harry's the last one remaining?"

"Well, he apparently made the diary when seventeen so I think it's safe to assume that was the first. I also think it's safe to assume Harry Potter was the last. Now that we have one that was made somewhere in-between those two, it shouldn't be too difficult to

arithmetically extrapolate a formula from magical power readings. Even the residue on the diary still left an imprint of the power it once held. This should enable us to accurately predict how many he made, especially when we find any more. Their power readings should fit right into our prediction."

The auror in Amelia just kept coming up with more questions that she wanted the answers to. "We think Dumbledore's known about the horcruxes since that Halloween, why in Merlin's name hasn't he done anything about it? It was only eighteen months ago Harry Potter slapped a destroyed one on his desk, surely he'll have made some headway into solving these problems?"

"I doubt it. Dumbledore is brilliant with his wand, at Charms and Transfiguration he probably has no equal. We both know about his skills at alchemy but Arithmancy was never his strong suit. Oh he passed his NEWT but took it no further, he probably wouldn't know what I'm going to attempt is possible. What we will need is possible locations Voldemort may have hidden these things, I'm hoping Dumbledore has some ideas about that."

"What sort of range will your detector give?"

"Barely a square mile. Unless we can narrow down locations, it could take years to do a grid search of Britain. That's also assuming they are all stored here, otherwise we might never find them."

"If the old fool had only shared this information, Voldemort would be nothing but a bad memory by now. Just one more reason for me wanting to wring his scrawny neck."

That comment brought a question from the unspeakable. 'Just how bad do you want to get your hands on the old wizard?'

Amelia answered with a glare that didn't need words. Her friend then supplied the means. "What they attempted to do with Harry and your Susan could be considered line theft. If you add those charges, you know what the punishment could be. I think we also know what Dumbledore's reaction would be too."

Adding those charges would mean she was forced to inform Susan about the plot, but there was something else that needed to be organised first. "That can't happen unless we have a procedure in

place to deal with Potter's situation. We both know what Fudge is like so there can be no mistakes here. The trials are set for Monday so we need to have a working method that I can take to them on Sunday."

"Now that I can narrow my search, I should be able to confirm or deny whether Miss Granger's proposal would work by then. If you don't mind, I would like to come with you to that meeting."

"Thanks, I think that one should go better than the death sentence I handed Harry today. I can't wait to see Dumbledore's face when he thinks he's holding all the aces, only for us to triumph him before throwing his arse in Azkaban."

That thought brought a smile to both their faces.

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There was a distinct lack of smiles in the Grangers bedroom that night. There was a distinct lack of anything and the silence finally got to Emma. "Dan, please tell me what you're thinking?"

"I'm thinking I should have booted McGonagall's arse right out our front door that day she turned up and told us Hermione was a witch. You tell me our fifteen year old daughter needs to have sex with her boyfriend to save his life and a part of me just wants to get out my shotgun and shoot the little bastard."

"Dan!"

"You asked me what I'm thinking and there it is. What do we know about this ritual thing? Will they be selling tickets so people can watch?"

"You know our daughter isn't like that..."

"Emma, our daughter would have sex with Harry in the centre circle of the Wembley Stadium pitch, during half time of the FA cup final, if it helped Harry in some way. In case you hadn't noticed, our daughter is totally and utterly besotted with the boy."

"Of course I bloody noticed, you're conveniently forgetting that the boy feels exactly the same about her." Emma was really glad that

Hermione was staying over at Harry's, the last thing she needed at the moment was to hear them arguing over this.

"Look, I don't care what you say, they're both far too young to be having sex. That is my opinion and I can't see it changing."

"I agree with you, and so does Hermione. What she's really worried about is Harry's opinion. If he thinks they're too young, or sees it causing a rift in our family, Hermione is sure he'll say no. We've already seen he was ready to give up his magic to get out of Hogwarts, what do you think he will do if he thought this would hurt Hermione?"

"Shit Emma, don't try and lay any blame for this at my feet. You must have known what my reaction would be, and so does Hermione. If this needs me to sign my permission then I don't think I can do that, it's a step too far for me. I really like Harry but this is just too much for me to handle. How could any father be asked something like that about his fifteen year old daughter?"

Emma then told her husband the information she was sure he wasn't going to like. "The form we already signed takes away our right to object, Harry and Hermione are betrothed so the next step is their decision to make." Dan was struggling to find words when his wife totally blew him out the water.

"This is not some teenage wham-bam, thank you ma'am and I'll give you a call sometime. Hermione told me this ritual will see them joined for life, faithful to each other until the end. Tonks then added that, in the magical community at least, they would be married."

Dan was gasping like a fish out of water, his mouth was going but there were no words coming out. Emma then delivered the coup de grace. "Our daughter would be Mrs Potter, in a few more years that would change to Lady Hermione Jane Potter, married to Lord Harry Potter. The ritual would see them married, allowing Harry to come into some of his inheritance at once."

Dan had no answer to that either. "Now I have already said I think they are too young for this but we have to consider the alternatives here. In any situation regarding Hermione, my benchmark is always what I think is best for our daughter. I can't imagine a single scenario where a dead Harry Potter fits that bill."

Emma knew she was pushing her husband here but Dan could be every bit as stubborn as Harry where Hermione's welfare was concerned. Whatever decision he reached, they would need to be able to live with it for the rest of their lives. "We might be faced with this in the next few days, not something I'm looking forward to. All I know is that I would much rather be welcoming Harry into the family as my son-in-law than trying to pick up the pieces Hermione would be in if anything happened to him."

Emma turned on her side, her back to Dan, and attempted to get some sleep. She didn't think there was a cat in hell's chance of either of them getting any shut-eye tonight. Part of her agreed with her husband that they should have kicked McGonagall out that day. A much bigger part though remembered having Harry in the house over the holidays, and just how happy that made their daughter. They recieved many comments at their ball on just how cute a couple Hermione and Harry made, Emma could only pray they could spend many more holidays together as a family.

A/N Thanks for reading

Chapter 13

Harry once more woke in his large bed to find Hermione clinging to him, this time though she was under the bedcovers too. A slight exploration of his hands resulted in a contented sigh from his girlfriend, along with confirmation that at least they were both wearing pyjamas. "Hermione, what are you doing here?"

She was obviously not fully awake yet but Harry at least managed to decipher the word 'nightmare' from her mumblings. "Sorry you had a nightmare love but you need to get up, bad dreams would be the least of our problems if your dad caught us like this."

A now almost awake Hermione popped herself up onto her elbow to correct her boyfriend. "No Harry, you had the nightmare. Holding me seemed to be the only thing that drove it away."

"Well that certainly makes more sense. You still need to move though, before we get caught."

This was Hermione's cue to snuggle in even more. "Relax Harry, we have a chaperone."

Harry lifted his head to look over the snuggling Hermione and spotted the big black dog curled up on the sofa, Padfoot was snoring. Here was his chance to talk about what was most prominent in his mind. "Hermione, about what you said last night..."

Hermione pulled him back down to join her, she missed his warmth. She also wanted him as close as possible while she explained the facts of their lives to him. "Harry, until we hear back from Madam Bones there really is nothing to discuss. If there's another method for getting that thing out of you then we don't have to talk about this. If there isn't, then we still don't have to talk about this."

Harry was about to complain until she kissed him into silence. "You dove into a freezing cold lake and fought off mermen to rescue me, am I then just expected to stand by while the ministry cart you away to be killed? Not going to happen, especially if I have a means to help."

"You know there's no way your mum or dad would go for this, and I don't blame them one bit. I will not be the cause of a rift between you and your family, please don't ask me to."

"Harry, do you remember what you said to Ron that day at lunch?" Hermione then displayed that prodigious memory of hers to repeat Harry's words verbatim. "You're my friend Ron but Hermione is the person I'm going to spend the rest of my life with, you need to understand the difference."

"That works both ways Harry. For me, this ring you put on my finger means we're going to get married, have children and spend the rest of our lives together. What does it mean to you?"

"Everything you've just said would be all my dreams come true."

"Well Harry, apart from the children bit, I'm ready now. Our ages may be against us but we're both older than our years, just think of some of the shit we've been through together."

It was Harry's turn to kiss Hermione quiet now. "I would rather think of all the good times we had together, and the best of those was certainly the Christmas holidays. I want to be with you Hermione, more than you could possibly know, but I want the both of us to have it all. That means our families all around us. Sirius and Tonks, your mum and dad, is that too much to ask?"

"Glad I at least made the list this time Harry."

Both had been so engrossed with each other, neither had noticed Tonks enter the bedroom, she was now sitting beside a wide awake and grinning Sirius.

It was his godfather who asked the question they all wanted to know the answer to. "It's not too much to ask Harry, it just might be too much to achieve at the moment. Do you have any ideas on the matter?"

"Yes, if we want to be taken as adults, then we need to act like adults. Hermione's father never got around to having the talk with me that he promised, I think now would be a good time. I need to speak to him about marrying Hermione."

A most un-Hermione like squeal emanated from the young witch as she pounced on Harry.

The two adults watched the teens playfully wrestling in the bed, Tonks though just had to comment on what she just heard. "Big brass ones Sirius, I told you he sent Molly Weasley a howler?"

"Oh I agree, brass at least. I just hope Dan Granger lets him keep them. If Hermione was my daughter, I would probably castrate any boyfriend that was trying to pull a stunt like this."

Tonks could only nod in agreement, figuring her father's reactions when she was fifteen would probably be at least that. "Well, I think we should make sure the condemned man at least eats a hearty breakfast. I'm thinking though that we leave that bandage on his forehead, go for the sympathy vote."

"At least you'll be there to make sure things don't get out of hand."

The auror had to shake her head at that comment. "We covered this situation when I first took the assignment, Madam Bones was quite clear on the matter. Harry's on his own."

The giggling and laughter coming from the bed wasn't quite loud enough to mask the 'oh shit!' from Sirius, that expression had the auror's wholehearted agreement.

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The atmosphere at the Grangers could have done with some giggling and laughter, it could be described at best as strained. Both parents had taken different positions on this latest development. Though each could easily see how and why their partner reached their decision, there was just no middle ground for them to broach a compromise over. If ever there was an either / or scenario, this was it. The choice in front of them appeared to be either Hermione lost her virginity to her boyfriend or Harry could end up dead, Henry Kissinger couldn't find the middle ground in that situation.

The radio was playing in the background yet the silence was deafening, both were hurting but didn't have the words to heal the huge rift that was slowly growing within their family. The doorbell

ringing saw the couple jump before Emma went to answer it, she returned with the last person Dan expected to see today.

Harry had already decided before coming over here that this was not an occasion for small talk, he was certain 'terrible weather for golfing so let's talk about me shagging your daughter' would not go down well either. It was time to get straight to the point, though with perhaps a tad more tact than his previous thought.

Taking his Gryffindor courage in hand, Harry dived right in. "Hello Mr Granger, we never actually got around to having that talk you promised me. I'm betting there are a few more things you'd like to add to it now so that's why I came over."

Emma was now really worried, she knew how angry Dan was with this entire situation. "Where's Hermione, or Tonks? Isn't she supposed to be guarding you?"

"Hermione is back at the house while Tonks walked me over, she's down at the end of the street. She also has my wand."

Dan was looking at his wife with a pained expression on his face. "Do you really think he needs his bodyguard for this, or his wand?"

Harry answered before Emma could say anything. "If Hermione was my daughter, the boy would need more than a bodyguard."

Dan could only shake his head, how could he possibly hate this young man? "Emma, go and get Tonks and the two of you can share a pot of coffee while Harry and I have our much delayed chat."

Dan led Harry off to the room they used as a small library come study, it was understandably Hermione's favourite bolthole. "Take a seat Harry and tell me what brought you over here this morning?"

"That's easy sir, Hermione. I think you know I love your daughter and hoped that one day she would be my wife, not like this though, never like this." Harry had a whole speech prepared, it had sounded great too, but every word left him as he entered Hermione's home. Instead Harry found himself speaking straight from the heart, saying aloud what he kept buried deep inside.

"When Hermione discovered that being betrothed would offer me protection from having my memory wiped, she didn't mention it for a while because she felt like she was trapping me into having a relationship with her. Nothing could be further from the truth but that's what she thought."

Dan could see the young man was wearing his heart on his sleeve here today so decided to just sit back and let him ramble, he could ask any questions later.

"I now know exactly how she felt because this feels as if I'm trapping her into marriage, something I could never do. Your daughter is brilliant and beautiful with the whole world at her feet and, well I'm not any of those things. Staying in this house over Christmas was easily the best two weeks of my life, I got a chance to spend them with Hermione and see how a real family functions. You've met the Dursleys so have some idea what I'm talking about."

Dan couldn't help but smile at those holiday memories, he'd never seen Hermione happier. This though just appeared to make Harry all the more determined. "If me bonding with Hermione is going to put an end to times like that, then I won't go through with it."

Dan Granger had spent most of his life reading peoples faces, usually because the rest of them were laid out on a dentist's chair as he worked on their teeth. He was as certain as he could be that this young man sitting before him meant every word that he said. "You realise what that could mean?"

"I do sir, better than most. My life has nearly been ended on more than one occasion since I entered Hogwarts, in each case I've been very lucky but still fought back with everything I had. I have no intention of going quietly." Harry appeared deep in thought for a moment before adding, "I have no intention of going at all."

This really made Dan sit up and take notice, had Harry come up with an alternative? "Could you explain that please Harry?"

"I'm going to speak with Sirius and hope both of us can be out the country before the ministry is any the wiser. Dumbledore might have me marked down for martyrdom, excuse my language sir, but fuck that for no future. They'll hunt down the rest of the horcruxes so

Voldemort will remain a wraith unless he gets his hands on me, I have no intention of letting that happen either."

"Just the two of you Harry?"

"We'll be on the run for the rest of our lives sir, that's not a future for Hermione. I think that would be worse than going ahead with the bonding and her losing touch with you and her mother. No sir, I won't do that to her."

Dan was clutching at straws here, anything to keep Harry talking while his brain figured out what his next move was. "So, you've pretty much discounted there being any other way to get that thing out your head safely?"

"That would have to be yes, I'm just not that lucky. Sitting at the Halloween feast and my name comes out the goblet, that's more like the Potter luck."

Dan was all out of options. "What did you really come over here for this morning Harry?"

"My original plan was to convince you and Mrs Granger what a great son-in-law I'd make, trouble is I don't believe it myself. Hermione outclasses me on every level, I'm sure she'll find someone better one day. I also know this will devastate her, even if she only feels half of what I feel for her, but she'll have her family to help her through it. Family is something I've wanted my entire life, I could never take that away from her."

Dan was convinced, this was not some angle the young man was trying to pull, Harry genuinely would walk away from Hermione rather than see her estranged from her parents. The tears now silently running down the lad's cheeks told just how much this was costing the brave young man, Harry's heart was literally breaking right in front of him.

"I guess when you get right down to it, I really came here to say goodbye. I know you'll look after Hermione and please convince her that none of this was her fault. I would give anything to be her husband one day but the Potter luck just doesn't work that way."

Dan stood as Harry got unsteadily to his feet, the young wizard's intention appeared to be to shake hands goodbye and then leave, that never happened. As Harry shook his hand, the dam holding back his emotions finally broke. It didn't just break though, this was more of a catastrophic failure. His body was racked with sobs and Dan was forced to grab Harry as his legs no longer seemed capable of keeping him upright.

Harry's total breakdown was loud and certain to attract attention from outside the room. Sure enough, the door was flung open and Hermione came rushing in. That his wife and Tonks were close behind her went unnoticed by Dan, his daughter's presence demanding his full attention.

Hermione had taken one glance at her father holding a distraught Harry and exploded. "What have you done to him? What did you say to him?" Dan never got time to answer as Hermione was solely concerned with Harry's welfare. On hearing her voice, his sobs if anything appeared to increase in magnitude.

Hermione managed to help him back to the wing-backed chair he'd been sitting on. She then made sure he wasn't going anywhere by the simple procedure of parking herself on his lap. She had his head buried comfortingly in her chest while running her hands through his hair, all the time whispering endearments to the boy she loved. She totally missed her father being practically dragged out the room.

Emma waited until they had Dan in the kitchen before unloading. "Daniel Granger, what the hell did you do in there?"

Dan reached for the coffee pot and poured himself a cup of the dark liquid, leaving room in there for the brandy that he removed from the cupboard. "I said nothing and I did nothing."

"What we saw certainly couldn't be considered nothing. That looked to me like Harry was undergoing some kind of breakdown, and there was only the two of you in the room."

"I swear I did nothing." Dan took a hit from his spiked coffee cup before explaining to the two disbelieving women what had transpired. "Harry told me he would never split Hermione from her family so was refusing to go through with this ritual. He was planning on asking

Sirius if they could flee the country and was saying goodbye when, well you both saw for yourselves."

Emma picked up the brandy bottle and splashed some to both hers and Tonks coffees, using the actions, and the time this took, to try and compose her answer. It didn't help one bit. "Daniel Granger, I am probably madder at you just now than your daughter is, and I didn't think that was possible. You have your 'my little girl' blinkers on and can't see what's really happening here."

"I told you, I said and did nothing to cause that."

"You did nothing to stop it either." Tonks was trying to stay out of this but just couldn't. She was quickly coming to consider the young couple in there as family, and nobody messed with her family.

Emma was on a roll though and cut across Tonks' effort. "Let me explain to you what I think happened here today, and if you get your head out your arse I think you'll see I'm right." Dan sipped at his fortified coffee, hoping to ride out the twin attack.

"That young man in there has come through mental and physical attacks from real monsters and homicidal maniacs. Up until recently, every figure of authority he had in his life has betrayed him in some way. I'm almost certain the only thing standing between Harry and a total nervous breakdown is our daughter."

Emma had to stop for a sip of her own coffee. She didn't want to crucify Dan here, just point out the harsh realities of the situation they found themselves in. "Hermione has stuck by him through thick and thin, she's his rock and anchor to normality. For an instant today, that anchor was slipped. We all witnessed the results. He trusts her with everything that he has or is, what more could you ask for in a young man for our daughter?"

Tonks felt she had information that needed to be added here. "I've been with them constantly now for a few months and I would have to point out this is not a one way relationship. Hermione relies on Harry every bit as much as he banks on her. As individuals, both have self esteem issues yet are rock solid as a couple. I would bet, had Harry been stupid enough to go through with this nonsense, that's probably the condition Hermione would have been in when he left."

Dan could see it all now. "When I shook Harry's hand it must have been like finalising the deal for the lad, he just fell to pieces right in front of me. Harry said he originally came over to try and convince us he would make the best son-in-law in the world, I can't help wishing that was the conversation we did have. Hermione looked at me as if I was dog shit on her shoe, that's not something I want repeated any time soon. How did she get over here anyway, I thought she was staying with Sirius?"

"She arrived here barely a minute after Emma and I sat down, she was pacing back and forward outside that door like a caged tiger."

Emma knew her husband only had their daughter's best interests at heart, he just had a father's blindness to just how much Hermione had grown. She reached across the table and placed her hand over his. "Harry's still here so we can both hear that conversation. Hermione at least didn't pull her wand, I thought she was going to attack Amelia Bones yesterday."

"If I know your daughter, her first priority will be to put Harry back together again. Quickly followed by ripping him a new one for even thinking about leaving her. I don't expect them to emerge much before lunch so I'm going to nip back and let Sirius know what's happening. He'll be slowly going nuts and you can expect him to return with me."

Emma gave her first smile of the day. "With Dobby and Winky making lunch, it doesn't really matter where we eat. I think you're right about those two and I'll pop my head in to see if they need anything."

Tonks left as Emma checked on Harry and Hermione, she didn't think they had moved an inch and were conversing barely above a whisper. It was impossible to say if Harry looked any better since his head was still buried in Hermione's chest, he'd stopped crying though so Emma took that as a good sign and returned to find Dan had been doing some soul searching.

"I always knew I would one day be replaced as the most important man in Hermione's life, I just reckoned on having the spot for a few more years yet. It was plain today that Harry now holds that position."

"Harry holds a different position Dan. I love you with all my heart but it didn't mean I loved my father any less when we married. Tonks told me Harry wants nothing more than to be part of a family, he also wants us to be a big part of that family. None of us are happy with how this is playing out but I think we should try our best to accept it, we've just caught a glimpse of what the alternative could be."

The hard look his daughter had given him this morning deeply affected Dan, that those same features swiftly morphed into displaying affection and concern as she held Harry meant he would have to re-examine his priorities here. In his drive to do what was best for his daughter, he'd made the classic parent's mistake of not taking that self same daughter's feelings or opinion on the matter into account. It was a mistake he would not make again.

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Hermione had managed to calm Harry to the point where she now had the complete picture of what had taken place earlier. Part of her was horrified that he would even consider such a thing while another took comfort from the fact he clearly was unable to carry it out. She well understood Harry would have some noble reason behind this but had to nip any further attempts in the bud here and now. Hermione recognised better than anyone though that her boyfriend had just endured a horrendous few days, she wasn't going to add to that by giving Harry major grief over this incident.

She held him close and spoke softly into his ear. "We're a couple now Harry, the only way to remain a couple though is to talk to each other. I know I can be opinionated and downright bossy, I need you to tell me when I go OTT."

Harry was about to object when Hermione held him closer into her chest, any thoughts of objecting died right there. "Just like you can go off half cocked and jump right into something, that's going to need some work too."

"I was really stupid for even thinking I should leave you. Hermione, can you forgive me?"

He was looking at her now with such worry reflected in his eyes, she tried to gently kiss the doubt away. "We will only get through this if we stick together Harry, we're stronger as a couple. We can achieve

far more by each other's side than we can individually. You said only this morning that we needed to start acting like adults, that's what we need to do love."

"I'm sorry Hermione, I walked into your home and it suddenly hit me what I could be taking away from you. My whole strategy just crumbled the second your mother opened the door. It was run away with Sirius or let the ministry take me."

"Look in the mirror Harry and you'll see what I can't lose. Everything else we can work around."

They sat chatting like that until Dobby appeared and asked them to come to lunch.

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Amelia was supposedly having lunch with Susan. Instead she too had a crying teen in her embrace.

There was a large ministry presence at Hogwarts still and it would remain there until the school was back up and running. The two remaining senior staff had been promoted to head and deputy, with Sprout taking the top job. The minister had approved Harry's request for Lupin's return, with a promotion to Head of Gryffindor. Horace Slughorn had been coaxed out of retirement to handle the Head of Slytherin/Potions position.

This left the new Headmistress needing to promote someone to head her old house and find a transfiguration professor, preferably in the next few days. Some of the staff might be needed as witnesses at the trials tomorrow but they were hoping to have Hogwarts up and running by Wednesday.

Having just informed Susan about the line theft charges was the reason for her tears, Amelia had already decided her niece would be coming home for a few days before the story broke. They were sitting in McGonagall's old office, both their lunches untouched on the table in front of them, when a little visitor interrupted the pair with an important letter for Madam Bones.

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Harry was very nervous as he entered the room, that didn't last long. Emma scooped him into a hug as Hermione made straight for her father. She flung her arms around Dan and apologised.

"Sorry for earlier dad. Harry told me what happened and it wasn't your fault. I just jumped to the wrong conclusion."

Suddenly, everything was right again in Dan Granger's world. He hugged his daughter back for all he was worth. When Hermione left her father's embrace, she found an anxious Sirius waiting on her.

"You know this crazy idea was nothing to do with me?"

Hermione thought a hug was the best way to reassure Sirius that she didn't blame him in the slightest. "I know Sirius. Harry would lay his life down for those he loves, it just never occurs to the silly prat that anyone could feel the same way about him."

Harry had been released from Emma's arms, only so Tonks could grab him. "Listen Potter, Dumbledore and his greasy henchman couldn't get you away from me, don't you even think of making an attempt. No one runs out on this auror. Do I need to start going to the bathroom with you in case you sneak out the window?"

Tonks was attempting to make a joke out of the situation but Harry knew her well enough now to see the hurt behind her façade. It was also quite possible that, if he didn't convince her otherwise, she would carry out her threat of being standing right beside him when he next went for a pee. "I'm sorry everyone for all the drama, it won't happen again. I'm not going anywhere."

Emma understood Harry had been raised with little love or compassion from his relatives but her heart broke at the sight of him in Tonks' arms, apologising for any trouble he'd caused.

"Harry, amongst family, when it hurts you say ouch."

Dan had seen and heard enough. He'd decided to adopt the old adage that he wasn't losing a daughter here, but gaining a son. Even the thought of losing his daughter's respect and affection was enough to prompt this change of heart. "This waiting is killing us all, is there any way we can get a hold of Madam Bones today?"

"We could send a message..."

Hermione was interrupted by a loud pop. "Dobby would gladly take any message that helps his family."

He was soon joined by Winky. "Invite her to dinner? Winky and Dobby love to have guests." Less than ten minutes later, Dobby popped off with their message while Winky cajoled her family to eat the lunch the elves had already prepared.

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Susan was beginning to think this was a very bad idea, "Are you sure this will be ok?"

"You read the note yourself, they clearly wanted you here. I also told you they know who was responsible for any plots to get you and Harry together."

"They asked to see you, not me. It's probably only out of politeness I was added, you kinda left them with no choice."

"Relax Susan, since getting to know these people I've learned at least one thing. If they didn't want you here, you wouldn't have been invited."

Croaker was watching the scene with amusement, glad in some ways that he was a confirmed bachelor. He didn't miss the wards that they passed through at the gates though, this made the unspeakable glad his name was also on that dinner invitation. Without it, he would probably be lying in that hedgerow across the street about now.

Dobby escorted them into the reception room where his family was waiting, he'd taken their cloaks and now it was time for drinks before dinner. As usual though, his new family didn't stand on any ceremony.

Hermione had noticed Susan's 'deer caught in headlights' expression and headed straight for her. As Harry's betrothed, it would be better to get this over with as quickly as possible. Beside that, both of them considered Susan a friend and the witch was

clearly stressing herself over this incident. "Hi Susan, glad you could make it. I just wanted to say that neither Harry nor I think you were in any way involved in this plot. It was all down to Dumbledore, and his need to control people. You would have been an unknowing and unwilling victim, just like us."

It was like watching the sun emerge from behind black clouds, Susan's entire demeanour underwent a transformation. "Oh thank you Hermione, I've been worrying myself sick since I heard about this today. You know my fear of being controlled and I've never taken my necklace off since Harry gave it to me."

Amelia was delighted at just how well that had gone, it was now time to take it to the next level. "The reason I informed Susan, and also why I asked if she could accompany me here tonight, is that I need agreement from you three for the next phase of our plan to capture Dumbledore."

That grabbed the entire room's attention, Amelia then provided the information that they were waiting on. "If we make it public that Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape intended to use potions to manufacture a relationship between Harry and Susan, we can add attempted line theft to the list of charges."

Sirius couldn't hold back the chuckle as her meaning became clear. "Oh Amelia, that's sneaky, nasty and absolutely bloody brilliant. You think he'll buy it?"

"Could someone please explain to us poor dentists just what is going on here? I don't want these two agreeing to anything until I know what it is."

Amelia nodded toward her silent companion. "It was actually Croaker's idea Dan, so I'll let him explain the finer details."

All attention then switched to the nondescript man who appeared as if he was trying to blend into the background. Amelia apparently wanted him to earn his free meal. "One of the most heinous crimes in pureblood law is outsiders attempting to manipulate a family's bloodlines in this way. Betrothal contracts and marrying your cousin is fine, providing the head of the family sanctions it. None of the three involved had any legal right to interfere in the affairs of the Bones and Potter families."

Sirius of course knew all this and had very quickly sussed just what they were up to. "This crime doesn't just earn you time in Azkaban, it carries the penalty of a dementor's kiss. I'm assuming this is going to be all over the Prophet by tomorrow and you're hoping Dumbledore will come rushing to rescue Snape and McGonagall, totally unaware that we already know all his secrets?"

Amelia nodded in agreement but, before she could point out that there were certain things Susan didn't know anything about, Emma was on her in a flash.

"If you're hoping that Dumbledore will come forward and spill his guts, you must have a way to protect Harry?"

"I was just about to say that Susan is unaware of any other developments at the moment. If we decide to go ahead with this, I wanted her out of Hogwarts before the story broke."

Hermione was smiling knowingly at Amelia. "It also will help Susan tremendously if you can publicly say she spent the evening having dinner with Harry Potter, his betrothed, and their families."

Croaker couldn't help but chuckle at his friend's discomfort at being so easily read. Perhaps Amelia would begin to understand why the unspeakables were so interested in this young couple. That interest would only increase if they accepted what was going to be proposed tonight.

Harry saved Amelia's blushes. "If you have a solution to this problem, we don't mind if Susan knows about it. We trust her and, if Dumbledore does what you think, the story will be all over the country by the end of the week anyway."

Croaker nodded in agreement, while deciding to put the family out of their misery and answer the one question that they must be desperate to ask. "Other than the method suggested by Miss Granger, nothing that we have been able to find gives Mr Potter anything better than a fifty percent chance of surviving the procedure. I feel I must qualify that answer by saying, since an event like this has never been documented before, fifty percent survival chance is nothing more than our best guess."

Emma's nerves had been stretched pretty taut over the preceding few days, this proved to be her snapping point. "So the best that you can come up with is that Harry will either die, or he won't? Totally unacceptable, and so is the Dumbledore proposal unless you have something better than that. I want him punished as much as anyone here, but not at the cost of Harry's life."

"We have taken Miss Granger's initial proposal and refined it somewhat to put the odds in their favour. While there still remains an element of danger, we calculate the chances of an acceptable outcome at well over ninety percent."

Emma was relentless though. "Just to ensure we're talking about the same thing here, the only outcome that would be acceptable to us is these two being alive and well at the end of it. Oh, and just what qualifies as 'refinements' in a process like this?"

"Straight and to the point Mrs Granger, a pleasure to deal with someone using their mind the way it was supposed to be used. The version of this ritual your daughter discovered was more of a general guideline, we have unearthed the complete and unabridged method."

Those were terms the entire company could understand. "We've also considered the best location for the result we all want to see achieved. There is a room deep inside the ministry that is dedicated to the study of what some consider to be the greatest power in the universe, love. Performing the ritual here again increases the chances of a successful outcome. This is love-based magic at its most powerful and, should the shadow hanging over Harry be expelled as expected, it will find itself in a totally inhospitable environment."

This comment saw the first traces of blushing from the pair who would be performing this ritual. "Finally, the young couple will be asked to invite someone they trust into the room with them. Their task will be to cast a binding spell at the spirit in the event its not destroyed on expulsion. This is purely a safety measure to ensure there is no possibility of its escape."

It was now a very red-faced Harry and Hermione who glanced questioningly at each other before both coming to the exact same

conclusion, they turned as one to the person they trusted to help them with this.

Tonks was taken aback by the trust they were showing her but there was just no way she could possibly resist the two pairs of begging eyes that focused intently on her. "Ok, enough already. If you need me, I'll be there."

Dan asked the question he really didn't want to know the answer to. "Do you have any idea of what timescale we are working with here?"

"We hope to have the others destroyed before they proceed with the ritual. I spent hours going through Dumbledore's office today searching for clues. It was a veritable mine of information on Tom Riddle, along with a sketchy hypothesis that may turn out to be a lot more accurate than the old meddler thought."

Amelia knew this but what the fool then did, or didn't do, that had her blood boiling. "Dumbledore figured that Tom would conceal these abominations in places that had some special reference to him, he also guessed that founders objects would attract his interest too. Then the stupid old bugger sat on his arse, and the vital information, for well over a decade and did nothing about it."

"It turns out Tom's mother lived only a short distance from his father's muggle house where he'd been hiding, we plan to start searching that entire area with our detector tomorrow."

While listening to the unspeakable, Harry had a flash of inspiration, or more like understanding. "Tom was an orphan, check Hogwarts." The look this comment drew then had Harry offering an explanation. "Tom was an orphan who hated where he was forced to live. He knew he was different but had no idea why, Hogwarts changed his life forever. I can understand that. Up until recently, Hogwarts was the only place I considered home."

Hermione slipped her arm supportively around his waist as she offered another possibility. "He gave one to Lucius Malfoy to keep safe for him, could he have done the same with any more of his followers?"

Amelia was shaking her head and looked straight at her smirking unspeakable friend. "Ok, I get it now. I've been an auror for over

thirty years and neither of those suggestions occurred to me." She then turned her attention back to the young couple. "If you don't want to work for Croaker here when you leave school, come and see me. The aurors can always use instincts and intelligence like that. The fact that I've seen you face down Dumbledore, and even me, bodes well for any future in law enforcement."

Sirius wanted to know if they had any idea just how many of these things they still had to find, Amelia jumped in to answer. "Our friend here is almost certain we're looking for another three, getting our hands on one more should give us a definite number. Just don't get Croaker talking on the arithmetical equations he used to work this out, we'll be here all night."

Dobby appeared to announce that dinner was ready, Hermione took a bewildered looking Susan by the arm to lead her and Harry into dinner. "Don't worry Susan, we'll explain it all during dinner but you need to let us know what's happening inside Hogwarts since we left."

The little Hufflepuff was almost babbling as she attempted to cram the shenanigans of the last few days into a few minutes. "With everything that happened at the second task, issuing points to the champions was completely forgotten about and now no one knows what will happen next. Professor Lupin is coming back to take over defence and be the head of Gryffindor. Oh and wait until you hear what happened to Malfoy..."

Dan took his wife's arm and followed the teens into dinner. "I get it now. No matter what happens, Hermione's still our daughter."

This earned him a kiss. "I knew I married a smart man."

Sirius walked beside Amelia, he wanted to know more about her plans for Dumbledore.

Dobby had a grin on his face as he watched his family come back together again, it had been a rough few days. Dobby had concealed himself in that room today when Master Harry had met with Mistress Mione's father. Dobby had been given a specific order to protect his master and that's what Dobby would do, Mistress Mione arrived before Dobby needed to take action. Watching as his mistress comforted his master warmed Dobby's heart. His new family was a

different world from his old one. Dobby knew which one he preferred and popped away to help Winky as the last guest passed him. Dinner needed to be served.

A/N Thanks for reading

Readers of 'A Different Halloween' have been left patiently waiting in the wings while 'Banking on Her' demanded my attention. I hope to switch that attention back in their favour for my next post. As is my usual method, I haven't written one word of my next post yet so there is always the possibility of that changing.

Chapter 14

Dan could hardly believe the difference twenty-four hours could make. This time yesterday you would have gotten long odds against the chances of them all sitting down to breakfast together as a family, far less laughter being present at the table.

When Sirius had observed how well the three teens were getting on at dinner, he had asked Amelia if Susan could stay the night. As they would all be meeting at the ministry this morning anyway, Amelia quickly agreed. Having her niece arrive at the trial in the company of Harry and Hermione would instantly quell any nasty rumours over the Prophet 'line theft' story.

The three had chatted well into the late evening before Hermione approached her father with a request that knocked Dan for six.

"Dad, is it okay if I sleep with Harry again tonight? He had terrible nightmares last night and woke the whole house, only holding me kept them away. This should get us all a good night's sleep, we need to be fresh for this trial tomorrow. You don't have to worry though, Sirius was in the room with us and would be again tonight."

Dan felt his new resolve had been tested to its limits already but what other option did he have than to say yes. He really believed his daughter about the sleeping part, and they could effectively be married in a matter of months or even weeks. Both certainly appeared far chirpier this morning leading to his attempt at teasing his future son-in-law.

"You're looking far happier this morning Harry, sleep well?"

"I had a great night's sleep, apart from Sirius' snoring."

Emma was the one who brought up what they would be facing today, she also couldn't miss the positive changes in Harry. "Are you all set for the trials? I think we all could have done with a day off first but that can't be helped now."

Harry's hand found Hermione's as he tried to put everyone's minds at rest. He understood they were concerned about his welfare and that was a strange feeling for Harry, nice but still strange. "I think yesterday was my lowest point ever, that was until Hermione

explained what a fool I was being. After that, I feel I could leap tall buildings in a single bound."

It was only Susan and Sirius who didn't get Harry's joke, the purebloods having no concept of Superman. Tonks though brought him back down to earth. "The way your luck runs Harry, you'll probably need superpowers before the day is out."

What should have been a joke saw Hermione nodding. "With the Potter luck, there's just no way today is going to be straightforward. Harry doesn't have to go looking for trouble, it usually knows just where to find him and likes to pop in from time to time."

Even Susan was nodding at that. "Its a bit premature this year though, it's usually June before Harry's called into action as things come to a climax."

Dan found his eyes watering and Emma pounding on his back, he'd unfortunately been drinking coffee when Susan had made her comment and almost choked. Sirius and Tonks were also in difficulty but that appeared more about stopping themselves bursting into laughter. Harry and Hermione meanwhile just sat quietly as their faces glowed almost red hot.

"Did I say something wrong?"

Emma herself was fighting back the laughter, though more so at her husband's discomfort with Susan's choice of words. "No Susan, just an unfortunate turn of phrase for this early in the morning. Dan just discovered he can't breathe and drink coffee at the same time."

This destroyed all resolve and the room rang with the sound of laughter, again something you would have gotten long odds against.

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The press was waiting on them as the group entered the ministry, thankfully the director of the DMLE was too. Amelia soon shepherded them through to a small, private waiting room beside the court. "First the good news. I just received an owl telling me a certain search in Little Hangleton proved positive. A team of ministry curse-breakers are heading there as we speak."

Dan was still struggling with regarding this as good news, it suddenly brought an event he was dreading having to deal with a massive step closer.

"Now today's proceedings are being held in open court, we wanted as many of the public in there as possible to witness what these people were up to. The Prophet went crazy over the line theft story and has really stirred public opinion up. So far, there's been no sign of Dumbledore but I will have a dozen of my best aurors inside that court, just in case."

This drew relieved nods from the adults so Amelia continued. "Auror Tonks will be sitting beside Harry and Hermione as she will also be called as a witness. Sirius, you, the Grangers and Susan will be sitting further back in the court. We already have their confessions under truth serum so today is basically to establish exactly what went on the morning of the second task. Is everyone okay with these arrangements?"

The trio who would have to take the witness stand shared a quick glance amongst themselves before confirming that they were. Amelia led the rest into the courtroom to take their seats, only after much hugging and wishing of luck though.

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An auror led the trio into the court, it was certainly an imposing sight that greeted the teens. The massive room was octagonal in shape, with a ceiling that appeared to reach into the heavens. The first impression each of them thought of was that it resembled an amphitheatre, and both teens hoped they wouldn't be thrown to the lions today. The reason for those thoughts was obvious, they were currently standing in another octagonal space in the centre of the room that would correspond to the amphitheatre's arena. This was clearly the working part of the courtroom while seven of the eight segments coming off the central space contained raised and banked seating. It appeared as if hundreds of witches and wizards had crammed into the courtroom, desperate to see for themselves just what was going on in the heart of their community.

The final section contained only five rather regal chairs, this section was obviously reserved for whoever was judging the case. The hexagonal arena was beautifully built from some kind of really dark

wood none of them could identify. Although almost black in colour, it effortlessly reflected light the attached gas lamps provided so everyone could see exactly what was happening. This was anything but a cosy setting though, the two eight feet tall cylindrical metal cages in the centre of the floor easily destroyed any idea of homely decor.

The trio were led to a seating area, immediately noticing that their family was in the first row of raised seating behind them. Harry had Hermione on one side, Tonks on the other with the rest of his family guarding his back. He felt ready to face anything they could throw at him.

On opposing sides of the cages were two tables, they assumed one was the prosecution as Amelia was sitting there. That left the other for the defence council. Tonks had obviously been in court before as part of her auror duties and was explaining in whispers to the young couple how things would work here today.

The judges entered and began taking their seats, Harry thought one of them might be Neville's gran but it was hard to tell as she wasn't wearing her trademark vulture hat. It was after the court official summoned the prisoners that the real drama began. Snape and McGonagall entered the court through the floor to appear inside the cages. Even though those bars looked as if they could contain Hagrid, both prisoners were chained to the seats they occupied.

Snape had his sneer going full blast, especially after spotting Harry, but McGonagall appeared a broken witch. Their former head of house seemed to have aged at least a decade and didn't even lift her head to look upon the courtroom. From where they were sitting, all three could clearly see the tears running down her cheeks.

Harry knew McGonagall's betrayal had really hurt Hermione, she was the one professor more than anyone else his betrothed had looked up to and respected. "Remember love, this is the woman who was okay with feeding me potions to break us up. This is the woman who got you out of bed and put you at the bottom of the Black Lake. She also didn't seem to mind I was going to be fed a potion to make me Dumbledore's mindless follower. Save your sympathy for those who deserve it."

She squeezed his hand and bravely nodded her head. Hermione knew everything Harry said was true, it still hurt though as she watched her former role model reduced to this.

Hermione was called to give evidence first as Amelia skilfully and considerately led her through the confrontation with McGonagall, right up until she woke soaking wet in the Black Lake.

The defence council introduced himself as Julian Micawber, both teens taking an instant dislike to the wizard.

He was of medium height yet large of girth, it looked like he hadn't been able to see his toes for some time. He was obviously attempting to appear distinguished but his entire elder statesman image was ruined by vanity. Julian Micawber was bald but attempting to hide that fact with the most ridiculous comb-over either Harry or Hermione had ever seen. The little area of hair growth he did still possess must have been about a foot long on the left hand side of his head. This was then combed over the acres of exposed scalp and abracadabra – bald no more!

This wasn't the reason for their umbrage though, it was the superior sneer he wore while addressing Hermione that got Harry's back up. His first statement / question saw the rest of Harry's body following as he shot to his feet.

"Miss Granger, I understand that you're born from muggle parents? Surely you wouldn't expect an old pureblood like Minerva McGonagall to respect an argument that certainly wasn't developed with people like you in mind."

Hermione's gaze though was drawn to Harry, he'd shot to his feet and she could see that it was only Tonks' grip on his arm that kept him over there. One of the judges also noticed this and commented on it. "Mr Potter, do you have something to add here?"

Harry stood straight and his green eyes bored into the defence council. "Yes sir I do. Miss Granger is the future Lady Potter and I will not sit here and listen to that position being brought into question. I myself notified our former head of house that my betrothed should not be approached without my presence, or does my status as a half blood render that conversation immaterial too?"

Harry then heard a well-known voice coming from directly behind him, the voice might be instantly recognisable but the commanding nature of it was new to Harry. "If it pleases the court, I also have some information to add. My godson is also my heir, making Miss Granger the future Lady Black too. I know I have been away for quite a while but when did it become common practice to publicly besmirch the family names of Potter and Black?"

Unlike his hair, Micawber's courage was not held in place by a sticking charm. It flew right out the courtroom as he found himself faced with the angry heads of two of their society's oldest families. The growls from the public galleries helped it on its way as Madam Longbottom's comments from the judging bench ensured it wouldn't be returning anytime soon.

"Well spoken sirs. Mr Micawber, the young lady here is wearing the Potter ring and that family's crest on her robes. You will treat her with the courtesy and respect these entitle her to, otherwise we can arrange alternative seating for you."

As the Longbottom matriarch's eyes moved to the cages behind him as she said this, her message was loud and clear. The other four judges nodding in agreement reinforced just how sticky a wicket he was currently on.

Amelia couldn't believe how stupid Micawber had been until she considered he didn't know Harry or Hermione. Julian obviously thought he was dealing with a couple of teens that could easily be bullied into confusion and contradictions. She decided to have a slap at his bare arse since he'd just had his drawers pulled down. "I would also like to remind the defence council that Miss Granger is a witness here, she's not the one on trial."

His opening question was just Micawber's lead into attacking the little bitch for not trying to save Potter's magic. The ferocity with which people had rushed to her defence left him with nowhere to go. Continuing down his intended route could see another prisoner cage added to the courtroom, Julian never wanted to win a case that badly. He was beginning to think he'd been foolish to take this case in the first place, this was not the kind of publicity he'd imagined receiving when he accepted.

"My apologies to the court, and of course Miss Granger. I was merely trying to establish how a witch of Minerva McGonagall's standing in our community could err so badly, I felt sure there must be extenuating circumstances."

"Oh there was!" This drew all eyes back to Hermione as she exorcised the image of McGonagall she'd built up to replace it with one that was more truthful. "Professor McGonagall believed every word and complied with every request Dumbledore made of her. She never questioned his orders, even when those orders saw her knowingly break the law."

She then rounded on the broken woman inside the cage. "You were supposed to be taking care of us, not plotting and acting to take our futures away. You then had the nerve to try and push the blame onto Harry when you got caught! Where is your great Albus Dumbledore now?"

Micawber now realised he was in way over his head. He quickly announced 'No further questions' before scurrying back to the relative safety of his seat.

Harry gave the returning Hermione a reassuring hug along with a quick kiss as she again took her position at his side, it was now Tonks' turn in the witness chair. Again Amelia skilfully led her through the previous attempt to poison her with potions on Valentine's Day before getting a visit from Dumbledore in the middle of the night.

Tonks really hadn't spoken about what happened with Dumbledore, there had been other pressing matters after Dobby fetched Harry a sobering potion to revive her. A certain Miss Granger had been depending on them, since she' been stuck at the bottom of the Black Lake. The young auror's emotions were there for everyone in the courtroom to see.

"Dumbledore placed me in a full bodybind while I was asleep, I couldn't move a muscle as he slowly poured firewhisky into the funnel he'd stuck in my mouth. He couldn't help boasting that his buddy Snape was currently in Harry's room and that they had plans for him that they didn't want me interfering with." Amelia had her stop a moment and allow Tonks a drink of water before continuing, the entire courtroom was hanging on her every word.

"I knew that being found drunk while on protection detail would end my career, and could even see me facing charges, but all I could think of was what they had planned for Harry. If they were prepared to take the risk of showing their faces in front of an auror, then I knew it must be bad. It would have come down to a disgraced auror's word against Albus Dumbledore, he would have gotten off Scot - free."

Amelia then produced the tainted Gillyweed Snape had supplied Harry with, and explained what the potion the plant had been marinated in would do to anyone ingesting it. That this was the exact same potion that they had tried to poison an on duty auror with was even more damning. Tonks then told the court why she accompanied Harry into the lake before the second task began.

"Harry had already decided he needed to get out from under Dumbledore's thumb before this happened, everyone has since heard how he intended to do this. Now knowing just what we were dealing with meant Harry wouldn't leave Hermione down there one second longer than he absolutely had to. We just didn't know how far Dumbledore would go..."

Tonks found herself being interrupted by her boss. "As the court knows, Auror Tonks and Mr Potter had to fight a running battle with the merpeople in their quest to get Miss Granger to safety. This behaviour is unusual for our underwater friends so we questioned the one who attempted to skewer Miss Granger with a trident after she had been rescued. We discovered Albus Dumbledore had paid two meremen to ensure Miss Granger did not leave the water alive."

The explosion of noise this revelation caused in the courtroom took all of Amelia's aurors almost five minutes to restore order. Harry had a shaking Hermione in his arms, a quick glance behind saw a crying Emma being consoled by Dan. Sirius appeared ready to render the two people in the cages into potions ingredients.

Amelia handed the confession from the captured merman over to the judges and informed the court that they had been arrested and prosecuted by their own high council. She then asked her last question of Tonks.

"It's clear to the court that you knew Mr Potter intended to deliberately give up his magic that morning, why didn't you do anything or inform anyone about this?"

"An auror on protection detail is required to work within the restrictions of a secrecy oath between them and the person they are protecting. I talked Harry into informing the auror department of his treatment inside Hogwarts, this lead to the headmaster being investigated over the basilisk incident. I was hoping he would be sacked, and therefore Harry wouldn't have to go through with his plan, unfortunately Dumbledore escaped with merely a reprimand."

Tonks looked over toward the young couple as she finished answering Amelia's question. "Both Hermione and I did everything in our power to shift Harry from this course, the trouble was neither of us could argue against his conclusion. If he didn't get away from Dumbledore then Harry Potter was going to end up dead."

A fifteen-year-old girl had just handed Julian Micawber his arse in a sling, he had no desire to repeat the process by going up against an auror. He wisely decided to stay in his chair and waive his right to cross-examine.

Tonks got needed hugs from both teens as she returned to her seat, now it was Harry's turn to take the witness stand.

Amelia had hardly began to lead Harry through his evidence when the trial was interrupted, Cornelius Fudge stormed into the courtroom.

"Stop this trial, new evidence has been brought to my attention..."

This in itself would have been enough to cause a commotion. The minister's guest though eclipsed even that statement, and answered the question of where this information had come from. Albus Dumbledore strode into the courtroom as if he owned it, totally ignoring the fact that he was the second most wanted man in the country.

Amelia had been half expecting something like this and swung into action. "Aurors, arrest Dumbledore!"

The old wizard suddenly found himself covered by a plethora of wands. Dumbledore again was unconcerned but Fudge appeared about to have an apoplexy. "Put those wands down, this man is under my protection."

Not a wand waivered, far less was withdrawn. "The aurors answer to me minister, and at the moment I have some questions that need to be answered. After working on this case, it wouldn't surprise me in the slightest if Dumbledore had you under an imperius curse."

"Don't be silly Amelia, Albus just explained what was really happening. We need to release the prisoners and then Mr Potter can accompany them back to Hogwarts."

This saw all eyes switch to Harry, only to discover he wasn't sitting in the witness chair anymore. His location though wasn't a mystery for very long. Snape's voice rang out around the courtroom, pinpointing Harry's whereabouts.

"Potter, what the fuck are you doing?"

Harry was standing next to Snape's cage. It was his wand that drew everyone's attention though, it was currently sticking through the grid of the cage and only inches from his former professor's head. "It really is quite simple, if I return to Hogwarts with Dumbledore then I'm as good as dead. I would rather end it here and now, with all these good people here as witnesses. Oh, and I intend to take you with me."

"Mr Potter, what are you playing at?"

"Quite simple minister, first curse to come near me I blow his fucking head off. A reducto curse should do that quite nicely from this range. Dumbledore wants me dead but it's going to cost him his pet death eater."

Dumbledore spoke for the first time that morning, apparently still unconcerned at the situation. "I really can't allow you to do that Harry."

"Oh I really expect you to try and stop me. This time though I'm not immobilised in my bed and there are hundreds of witnesses."

"Stop US Harry, you know we're in this together. Should be an interesting time for you McGonagall, let you know what the old man really thinks of his faithful follower. I can't see anyone being fast enough to get both of us."

Minerva was staring at the business end of a vinewood wand that was only inches from her nose, it was the determination in the girl's eyes though that spelled real trouble for the former depute. "Miss Granger, I had no idea Albus meant for you to die in that lake..."

"Yeah, and I believe it wouldn't have made the slightest bit of difference, you would still have put me down there."

The judge sitting in the centre of the five then got involved. "This is a courtroom, I will not have this kind of behaviour here."

"If it's a courtroom, then let's see some justice." Tonks had walked over and put herself between Harry and Dumbledore, with her wand joining the rest of the aurors in being directed at the old wizard.

"Auror, what is the meaning of this? You are only making this situation worse."

"Just doing my job Minister, protecting my charge from those who wish him harm. Dumbledore certainly falls into that category."

Harry could see they were only one mistake away from having blood on the walls, one flash of a photographer's camera and it would all kick off. That some of that blood might be Hermione's saw him speak out.

"The one with the power to vanquish the dark lord approaches, and the dark lord will mark him as his equal – the prophesied one is me." Harry used his non-wand hand to lift his fringe and remind everyone of his mark.

"He will have power the dark lord knows not – we know what that power is now and are getting ready to use it. And either must die at the hand of the other – I have to kill him and am ready to do so, but not to further the aims of Albus Dumbledore."

"You'll do whatever your told Potter, once I get some potion into you." Snape didn't really need to shout as Harry's words had

silenced the courtroom, everyone would have heard them even if he'd spoken softly.

Harry stared at the man in disgust before addressing the minister directly. "Minister Fudge, would you condemn me to that? I don't know what Dumbledore has told you but I promise it won't be the entire truth. He didn't even tell these two what he was up to. Hermione and I have been working closely with the DMLE and the unspeakables in order to bring Voldemort down. There is a plan that's generating results even as we speak."

Amelia took over, speaking to the minister without ever taking her eyes off Dumbledore. "Mr Potter is speaking the truth Cornelius. We know why the dark lord didn't die that night and are taking actions to ensure he will meet his end. We've already discovered two devices he used to anchor himself to this world and, as Mr Potter said, a team of ministry curse-breakers are right this very minute getting us a third."

For the first time in the proceedings, Dumbledore was visibly knocked back on his heels. "How is that possible?"

"It's possible because we shared information. Dumbledore has known about this for over a decade, and done nothing. Even worse, he told no one. Mr Potter has now killed the dark lord three times, but he keeps coming back. We hope to be in a position soon where that will no longer be possible."

Dumbledore was trying to recover. "It doesn't matter, there are still things you don't understand."

Amelia's gaze quickly moved to Harry, his slight nod gave her permission to do what she needed to. "Oh we understand everything, including Mr Potter's part in it. That is why he will be the last to be dealt with, undergoing an auror supervised ritual to finally get rid of the last trace of Voldemort."

This really knocked Albus for six. "There is no such ritual..."

Amelia jumped all over him. "Just because you couldn't find one doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. Before you start casting aspersions, let me categorically state here and now, in front of all these witnesses, that this ritual is pure light magic."

Cornelius' mood had fairly shifted, he was practically praying Amelia was telling the truth. "Can you really get rid of you-know-who once and for all?"

"We need Harry on our side, but the answer is yes. Harry is currently living at a secret location under auror guard, he's vital to the entire process. Dumbledore, I'll have your wand now."

Dumbledore appeared broken but not defeated. "I really don't think that's necessary Amelia, I have something here that negates the need for that." He very slowly moved his hand inside his robes and removed a scroll. "You see, Cornelius was kind enough to sign a ministerial pardon for Minerva, Severus and myself before we came down here."

Amelia so wanted to slap that sly smirk off his face, instead she took the offered scroll to verify his claim. "Can I ask minister if the pardon is just for this crime or a lifetime up until now?"

It was a clearly embarrassed minister who had to admit he didn't know. Dumbledore had arrived with the form already drafted, he'd merely signed it.

The judge in the centre wanted to see the document, as there was a legal question to be answer. Could a Minister of Magic pardon someone of crimes committed before he became minister?

As Amelia was levitating the scroll up to the judges' platform, a well-aimed reducto curse reduced it to confetti. Harry's voice rang around the courtroom. "Well, who would have believed it? Snape actually taught me something useful."

The centre judge stared down at Harry before making a proclamation. "Mr Potter, I warned you this is a courtroom. You are fined one hundred galleons for firing that curse."

Harry thought that was more than fair and quickly agreed to accept his punishment, his wand was now back inches from Snape's head.

There was a slight twinkle in the same judge's eyes as he then addressed Amelia. "Madam Bones, did you read this so-called

ministerial pardon before Mr Potter's unfortunate case of accidental magic?"

"Sorry sir, I never had the time."

"Well, as the minister has already stated he signed it without reading the contents, we are only left with the word of Albus Dumbledore that the former document was indeed what he claimed. Having listened to all the evidence in this case, I would have to say there is no way this court could accept the word of such a wizard as truthful." The other four judges all were nodding in agreement of this ruling. "For all we know, that could very well have been his grocery list. Therefore, I call upon you Madam Bones to do your duty."

Any pretence that Dumbledore was still in control of the situation was now long gone. He had over a dozen auror wands trained on him but it was the two on Minerva and Severus that really made his mind up. With the pink haired auror placing herself directly between him and Potter, there was no way to stop the little shit carrying out his threat. With the animosity that existed between the two, there was also no doubt in Dumbledore's mind that Harry would indeed blow Severus' head off. It was a beaten man who handed over his wand, only to be searched and his spare discovered. Screens were conjured and within seconds he was reduced to his underwear, there would be no hidden portkeys this time.

As the screens were removed, Albus Dumbledore was left standing there in a plain prison robe before being led to the third chair that had appeared in the courtroom. The instant he sat, chains began to wrap around his body and a prisoner cage grew out the floor.

It was only then that Harry and Hermione relented in their vigils and raced to embrace, the sound of cheering suddenly ringing in their ears. Amelia had erected the safety wards the instant Dumbledore had appeared, those in the public galleries had heard every word though been helpless to interfere. It was only with their removal that those in the court section could once more hear them.

The young couple were then joined by a relieved Tonks, she quickly led them over to where they could talk with the rest of their family. Emma was an emotional wreck while Dan and Sirius appeared as if they'd just run a marathon. Amelia came over to congratulate the trio, and offered comfort to a crying Susan. The judge called for a fifteen-

minute recess and they all headed back to the room they had used earlier.

Emma came rushing into the room and engulfed both of them in a hug, needing the reassurance that they were actually still in one piece. "I was screaming like a fishwife at Dumbledore until Sirius told me they had put up some kind of protective barrier, we could hear you but not the other way around. You frightened years off my life when you pulled that stunt."

Dan had a question he needed to know the answer to. "Could you really have killed those people in cold blood?"

Harry decided to answer for both of them. "In cold blood, probably not. If Dumbledore had started anything, then yes. These are not nice people Dan, they abused their position of authority and almost got the both of us killed on more than one occasion."

Amelia was holding Susan while adding to the conversation. "Dumbledore certainly believed they would carry out their threat, that was probably the deciding factor in him surrendering without a fight."

They were then surprisingly joined by the five judges, Madam Longbottom chose to be their spokesperson. "I know this is highly irregular, but so are the times we live in. We're here because of the claims made that you have a viable plan to defeat Voldemort once and for all. What can we do to help?"

Harry didn't hesitate for a second. "Put those three away for a very long time."

The head judge wanted some more information. "Do you know what Dumbledore's plan actually was?"

Amelia thought the answer might carry more weight coming from her. "The prophecy Harry alluded to was actually made to Dumbledore before Mr Potter here was born, that's why his parents went into hiding."

Augusta corroborated that statement. "At the time, this prophecy could have applied to two children. Harry here and my Neville. Voldemort chose to go after the Potter's first and Harry bears the scar from that night."

"Best guess is that Dumbledore wanted to lead Voldemort to Harry, thus completing the prophecy. With the prophecy no longer in play, Dumbledore himself could defeat Voldemort. Why else would he set a trap inside a school, and then employ Voldemort to teach our children?"

The head judge wanted a few things clarified. "I'm assuming this plan of yours is secret, since the minister didn't know the first thing about it. I'm also assuming you'd like the details kept that way for the moment?"

"Sir, do you know what a horcrux is?" Harry's question shocked all five of them, and provided his answer. "Voldemort made a number of these and that's what we are destroying. At the moment we're searching for the last two before I have to undergo a ritual, then he'll be gone for good. Dumbledore has known about this for years, I slapped a destroyed one on his desk after defeating the basilisk, yet he's done nothing but try and have me killed."

The attitude of all five judges had now hardened. "Time we got back out there and finished our business for today."

No one in that room expected any of the prisoners to be sleeping anywhere but Azkaban tonight.

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Julian Micawber had used the break to empty the contents of his hip flask, he would be paying a visit to the rest of the bottle the instant he returned to his office. He was sitting back at his table, having been under it during the confrontation, and nothing was going to move his arse from its relative safety until this case was over. Amelia was once again using all her skill to lead the Potter lad through his evidence but Julian didn't give a shit, nothing would convince him to stand and ask any more questions. One thing he would like to know though was just who the hell these people were?

They had yet to sit their OWL's but both were already working with the aurors and the unspeakables to take down Voldemort. While he had taken cover below the table like any sensible person would, they had drawn their wands and charged into the fray. Julian didn't have one shred of doubt that McGonagall and Snape would have

been missing their heads had Dumbledore not complied with Amelia's order to surrender his wand.

Watching while Potter destroyed evidence, a ministerial pardon no less, was something that would stay with the lawyer for the rest of his life. That the five judges, Director of the DMLE and even the Minister of Magic then colluded to treat this as a misdemeanour meant the writing was on the wall. Dumbledore's time was over and the Potters would be their society's golden couple. Even the Granger witch's circumstances of birth would be overlooked if she assisted Potter and finish the dark lord once and for all.

The old fool then didn't do himself any favours by attempting to claim that everything he had done was for the greater good of their society, it didn't wash with anyone. The upshot of that claim though was Dumbledore had just basically admitted his guilt to the court.

The public had already made up their mind and it would appear the couple had the full weight of the establishment behind them as well. It would be a very foolish person who stood against those odds, Julian's parents hadn't raised their son to be a fool.

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With no classes at Hogwarts, students from the three schools had gathered in the great hall to listen to the trial being broadcast on the WWN. Tension was certainly running high as Hermione told her tale. Most of the students had gotten to know and like Tonks through the auror helping in class, hearing her evidence didn't lessen the tension in the slightest. Dumbledore's arrival took that tension to boiling point.

When Harry threatened to blow Snape's fucking head off, there was loud cheering at three of the house tables with wands being drawn by the lions. Remus screaming at the Gryffindor's to behave, that, and the fact Hermione now had her wand on their former head of house, knocked some of the fight out of them.

Everyone suddenly recognised that the trial at the ministry wasn't a game any longer, people they knew could be dead in the next few minutes. When the radio commentator explaining that the curse they just heard being cast was Harry Potter blasting Dumbledore's

pardon to tiny pieces, this actually drew cheers from all corners of the great hall. The Slytherins had no love of Dumbledore either.

The fifteen-minute recess allowed the staff to once more regain control, threatening to end the broadcast if their behaviour became unacceptable again was an effective deterrent. Listening to Harry's evidence left everyone wondering if they would ever see Potter or Granger in the castle again. No one could blame them if they chose not to. They also couldn't see any other verdict but guilty being returned by the judges. The biggest cheers of the day though were reserved for when all three prisoners were sentenced to life in Azkaban.

Ron shortly found himself cornered by his sister and Neville, Ginny was in no mood to stand on any ceremony. "That was your supposed best friends who just went through that, and you still haven't written to them. Screw you Ronald Weasley, Neville and I will be writing to them today."

This drew quite a bit of attention with more Gryffindor's wanting to drop them a line. When the three champions also expressed an interest in doing this too, Remus became involved.

"I'm having dinner with them tonight, anyone who wants to contact them can give me a note and I'll deliver it then."

This scattered the forming crowd as they all headed off to put quill and ink to parchment. Remus was really looking forward to tonight, he'd not had a chance to meet with Sirius since regaining his freedom. Hogwarts had been desperate for Remus to start right away so this was really his first opportunity to visit since the whole debacle of the second task kicked off.

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Cornelius was sipping a snifter of brandy while wondering when his hands would stop trembling. He couldn't believe how close he'd come to losing everything today. Harry Potter had literally saved his political life when he blew that pardon to smithereens, the public would have demanded the minister received similar treatment if those three had walked free from court today.

Amelia had demanded, and received, an unbreakable vow from him not to reveal just what the ministry and Potter were up to. Hearing the full story certainly didn't help with the shakes. That Albus had all this information yet chose a path diametrically opposed to what the ministry intended to do effectively sealed his fate.

In a way, Dumbledore's greatest mistake was his attempts to exclude Miss Granger from the equation. It now appeared as if she was in fact going to be the solution to all their dark lord problems. Her love for Mr Potter was there on display for everyone to see today. Thankfully, when she eventually saved them all, it was going to be a much more private affair. That was not something Cornelius wanted broadcast on the WWN.

A/N thanks for reading

Chapter 15

Dinner that evening not only included Remus as a guest, Amelia and Susan were quickly becoming regular visitors while Croaker was there to provide an update on his horcrux search. Since the focus of that search would be moving to Hogwarts tomorrow, Remus was also being brought into the loop.

"We recovered a hidded ring that we think may have belonged to Salzar Slytherin. It's definitely a horcrux and fits exactly into the pattern my formula forecast. We can now confirm that there are two more to discover, with hopefully one of them being at Hogwarts."

This news was greeted enthusiastically, though a worried Dan asked the question of when they thought they would be able to get their hands on the remaining horcruxes?

"If we find another one in Hogwarts tomorrow, it then becomes a case of systematically checking properties of known and suspected death eaters. Unless we get really lucky, that could take a while."

Harry was reminded of a conversation with his first magical friend. "Hagrid once told me that there was no place safer in the magical world than Gringotts, could it possibly be there?"

This floored everyone for a moment before Amelia finally gave her thoughts on the matter. "I would have to say that's a distinct possibility, I have to also say its one I hope is wrong. I have no idea how we would go about gaining access to someone's vault. I can't imagine the goblins cooperating in any search, far less getting our hands on anything that search throws up."

The magical users there all apparently agreed with that opinion, all except Harry and Hermione. "I think the goblins would want to see Voldemort gone just as much as we would."

Hermione agreed with Harry. "The may not let us search vaults, or even enter them, but we don't have to. Croaker's detector should be able to pinpoint the exact vault, could a goblin then enter and finish off the horcrux?"

Harry could see exactly what his betrothed was proposing. "Nothing would be taken from the vault as the destroyed horcrux could just be left in there."

Amelia and Croaker shared a glance before she answered for the ministry. "I think that's such a good idea, I will approach Gringotts tomorrow and ask for a meeting with the director. It may take a few days but that will allow Hogwarts to be searched, along with the more prominent death eater properties."

There was a great deal of delight around the table. The trial had been a spectacular success for them and they were making amazing progress in the horcrux hunt, it was now time for Amelia to dish out the bad news. "As the entire trial was public, all of magical Britain now knows Harry here is vital to defeating Voldemort. I don't think there was enough information broadcast for anyone to tie Hermione's vital role in the process, but again everyone knows just how deep your relationship is. Even with an auror guard, I really don't think it would be safe for you two to return to Hogwarts until this is over."

Both Harry and Hermione glanced over at the pile of letters Remus had brought them from Hogwarts. They planned on reading them after dinner and had been looking forward to seeing their friends on Wednesday.

Amelia attempted to soften the blow. "You both can get underage exemption licences so you can practice magic here, and of course Tonks will still be assigned to you so she can help with lessons too!"

Harry glanced toward his godfather. "Sirius, if we got permission from Hogwarts, could we have some of our friends stay here for a weekend?"

Sirius thought this was a great idea. The last thing he wanted was these two isolated from people their own age. "We certainly have the room, and you know Dobby and Winky just love having guests. I have no problems whatsoever with your friends staying here."

Sirius wasn't the only one who thought this was a good idea, Amelia could clearly see her niece enjoyed it here. "I think I can speak for the ministry when I say that any reasonable request from Harry Potter will be met with a very big yes. By reasonable, I think anything

less than asking to be minister of magic would get a positive response."

This drew a chuckle from Croaker, he really liked these people and hadn't enjoyed himself as much in years. Intelligent and meaningful conversation was so hard to find yet, once again, they were sitting around this table and helping make the world a better place."Personally, I think either Harry or Hermione would make a better minister than the person currently in that office. Then again, I also think Dobby would probably do a better job than Fudge."

The two of them not going back to Hogwarts really pleased Emma. Not only would Hermione and Harry be staying at home, she would get to see them performing magic and meet some of their friends. She also couldn't help but notice her husband's reaction every time the horcrux hunt was mentioned. Dan was doing his best to cope with an impossible situation, and that situation appeared to be heading toward them at breakneck speed. They were going to have to speak about it again when they were alone.

With the school only getting back up and running on Wednesday, they decided to ask their friends if they could visit the following weekend. Now they would need to read the letters and work out who they wanted to invite. From the pile of parchment on the table, it appeared as if half the castle had written.

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Minerva McGonagall sat alone in her cell with only her tears for company. Hermione Granger's wand in her face today had been a life-changing moment for the former Head of Gryffindor. There was not one shread of doubt in Minerva's mind that the witch would have carried out the threat to blow her head off.

Miss Granger reminded Minerva so much of herself when she was a lot younger, both with her ideals and total commitment to them. The young witch had faced down the minister of magic and head of the Wizengamot in defence of her wizard, clearly prepared to pay the ultimate price for that action if she had to. Minerva had done the same with Dumbledore for many, many years, but she now realized the similarities between her and Hermione ended right there.

While Miss Granger had Harry's full confidence and was clearly heavily involved in their decision making, Minerva had blindly followed a wizard she thought had all the answers. Today had shown her just how foolish that course had been. Yes, Albus certainly had answers. Those answers were not necessarily the right ones though, and definitely not all the answers available.

It was now clear to her that, right from that night they left Harry with those terrible muggles, Albus had decided the boy had to die. That the son of James and Lily had such a terrible life, and she played a major part in that, was eating away at her soul. The dementors weren't here yet but Minerva doubted if she would ever have a happy thought again for them to feed on. Still, the old witch knew she would need to work fast before the debilitating effects of being in close proximity to those abominations robbed her of the will to do what was needed.

She had already ripped and braided the thin blanket her cell came furnished with, the complimentary wooden bucket for personal relief would also be needed. By upending the bucket and standing on it, Minerva could just reach the metal bars that adorned her cell's tiny recessed window. It took a bit of doing with her hands trembling so much but she eventually managed to firmly secure one end of her improvised rope to the sturdy chunks of metal that were intended to ensure she was contained in Azkaban.

Minerva could feel the dementors approaching, and that actually made the next bit easier. If this is what the rest of her life now held for her, it was time to end it. Minerva McGonagall, former Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts kicked the metal bucket away.

She was found hanging there the next morning, the word 'sorry' scratched on the wall of her cell.

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After their guests left, Harry and Hermione retreated upstairs to read the letters from their friends and start to work on their replies. It was well over an hour later when Tonks stuck her head in the door to check they were okay. The sight that greeted her was so cute, she just had to get the other three up to see this.

Hermione was cuddled into Harry as the letters were scattered all over the bed. Both clearly had a trying and tiring day as they appeared to have been sleeping for some time. Emma had just wondered out loud how they were going to get them to bed without waking the couple when Dobby popped into the room. A few of snaps of his fingers saw the letters piled neatly on the bedside cabinet, Harry and Hermione changed into their sleepwear, the bedcovers pulled back and the now floating couple gently lowered back into the bed, still holding each other.

Dan was slowly shaking his head. "I could have done without seeing that for at least a few more years."

Sirius had immense sympathy for the troubled father. "I have known Hermione for less than a year but already she means the world to me. If that was anyone else but my godson in that bed with her, I would be standing here wanting to rip his lungs out."

"I've watched them for a couple of months now and can honestly say I've never seen a young couple more devoted to each other. We all saw what they did today, Hermione was out her seat the moment she saw Harry in trouble. I couldn't have stopped her, even if I wanted to. Harry was the exact same when he knew she was at the bottom of that lake. After hearing what Dumbledore had planned for her, I'm now so glad he was."

Sirius was nervously running his fingers through his hair as Tonks' comments saw his thoughts returned to that trial. "Nearly gave me a bloody heart attack! I still can't believe they pulled it off. Dumbledore thought he had all his bases covered and yet still ended up in Azkaban. I hope they parked his ancient arse in my old cell. Planning the murder and enslavement of children in his care makes him worse than any death eater in my book."

Tonks was in total agreement but then asked the question that had troubled her since her boss brought it up earlier that night. "How do you two feel about having to leave your house for now, and needing an auror stationed at your practice?"

This drew a shrug of the shoulders from Emma. "Amelia made a very good case for it. If they can't get to Hermione or Harry, they might come after us. Staying here won't be a hardship and she

promised to assign an auror who will at least be comfortable in a non magical environment."

"Hey, maybe they could take over for Janet on reception?"

Emma liked her husband's idea immediately. "They would need to be pretty bad not to be better than Janet. Perhaps she'll take umbrage and hand her notice in?"

Dan didn't think they could be that lucky. "Janet outlasted the last dentists in that practice, and will probably still be there when we leave."

Sirius had a suggestion he was sure would work. "Perhaps you should get Hermione to stick her wand in the woman's face? Scared the life out of me, and I wasn't even the one she was pointing it at."

The four withdrew, leaving the young couple unchaperoned tonight. Since it was beginning to appear as if they would effectively be married within a few weeks, none of the adults really saw the point.

Emma already had a long and detailed talk with Hermione regarding available methods for not making her a grandmother anytime soon. Now that they were going to receive underage exemption licenses, Sirius intended to fulfill his duty as godfather by teaching his godson the contraceptive charm tomorrow.

-oOoOo-

Remus expected the enquiring faces that greeted him at breakfast, he just wished there was better news for them. "Sorry guys, Harry and Hermione had a meeting with the DMLE and the unspeakables last night, they didn't get a chance to read your letters until after I left. I'm sure you'll hear from them within the next few days."

With Cedric being older, and his father working in the ministry, he caught the undertones contained in the professor's words. "So they won't be returning on Wednesday?"

Remus wouldn't lie to them, and he wanted the surprise the couple were working on to be just that, a surprise. "It was decided last night that, until Voldemort is defeated for good, they really do need the

security of a secret location. I'm sure they will tell you more about it when they write."

Watching the disappointment in their faces, and knowing about the invitations that would soon be winging their way to Hogwarts was almost as good as a prank for the marauder. The map in his pocket was a great reminder of his past, as was the person who loaned it to him. Remus thought Harry grew more like his father by the day, and couldn't be happier with the lad's choice of life mate. If there was one thing Remus knew with all his heart it's that James and Lily would be immensely proud of their son.

He was also delighted to play any role in the final defeat of the monster who murdered his friends that fateful Halloween. Even if that role was only to assist Croaker with his search of the school, Remus wanted to play his part. With Croaker's detector now proven to work and the marauders' map to aid them, he was sure if that piece of filth was in Hogwarts then they would find it.

-oOoOo-

Harry and Hermione were in high spirits the following morning as they discussed with their parents the compromise they had reached before falling asleep last night. All four adults were delighted to see them so happy after the events of yesterday.

"...we just realized from reading their letters how little they actually knew of what was going on..."

"...we also felt terrible about placing the other three hostages in more danger..."

"...but we still have the problem of Cho not being able to stand Ron..."

"...and Ron not being able to stand anywhere near Fleur..."

"...so we would like to invite them as two separate groups..."

"...over two weekends..."

Watching them finish each other's sentences just underlined to everyone there just how close these two were. Tonks though asked

the all-important question. "Good plan, but which group do you ask first?"

The couple blushing told everyone they'd gotten right to the heart of the matter. Hermione gave their answer while Harry explained their reasoning.

"...we would like to invite the other champions first..."

"...we walked away and left them that morning barely having time to say cheerio!"

Their auror bodyguard could only smile at that. "I was there remember, I think we had enough on our plates that morning though I agree with your choice. What about Susan, what group are you putting her in?"

"We were actually thinking of asking her both weekends. She's the only person our own age who actually knows what's going on."

Emma couldn't help but pull her daughter's leg here. "And it gives you someone to talk about your boyfriend with..."

The couple were saved the further embarrassment of having to answer any more questions by Dobby's announcement that Amelia Bones wished to see them. She was invited right in and it only took a casual glance to determine she wasn't here with good news. "There's no easy way to say this so I'll just come out with it. Last night, Minerva McGonagall hanged herself in her cell."

Hermione emitted a sound that was half shriek, half gasp of terror and found herself smothered in Harry's arms before anyone else could react.

Amelia had expected a reaction like this and pulled no punches. "Hermione, you need to listen to me. This was in no way your fault. McGonagall spent her time in her ministry cell reflecting on her choices in life. The only thing keeping her functioning was her belief that Dumbledore knew what he was doing. When that was shown to be nothing more than some demented ramblings about the greater good, her world collapsed."

Amelia was now kneeling beside a sobbing Hermione, trying to ensure she had the distraught witch's attention. "We have professional people at the ministry who should have spotted this, and didn't. We were all too busy celebrating the capture of Dumbledore, and anticipating the final end to Voldemort. The ministry dropped the quaffle on this one, not you. You two caught the snitch and won us the game, we're the ones who messed up."

Hermione had trouble speaking through the sobs, she eventually managed to get her message out. "I can still see her eyes as she apologised for putting me down there. McGonagall desperately wanted me to believe she knew nothing about the mermen, I just blew her off."

Tonks was now also kneeling beside the sitting girl. "Harry said yesterday he didn't know if you two could have carried out your threat and I applaud that honesty. That doubt didn't show though, which was what won us the day. McGonagall placed her faith in Dumbledore while you chose the young man currently clinging on to you for dear life. There is no doubt in my mind who chose the better wizard, and that was her downfall."

Amelia could understand this reaction, the witch in question had been their head of house for nearly four years. She didn't know if this would help but decided to give it a try. "She left a final message scraped into her cell wall. I may be making assumptions here but I personally think it was meant for you two. It was only one word but it spoke volumes. It simply said sorry."

Harry was now sobbing too as Dan and Emma took over. They helped the young couple to their feet and headed off in the direction of what they were all beginning to regard as Harry and Hermione's bedroom.

Amelia felt awful for having to tell them that news and attempted to apologise to Sirius.

"It's better they find out about it this way, rather than discovering tomorrow's headlines. Just a pity Dumbledore hadn't decided for once in his life to do the decent thing and hang himself with that ridiculous beard of his. That would have seen me celebrating."

This didn't get the reaction he expected from Amelia, Sirius soon discovered why.

"Getting thrown in Azkaban didn't appear to bother Dumbledore nearly as much as the shock of discovering all his secrets were known. McGonagall's death though has hit him pretty hard. She was his most trusted lieutenant and this would seem to be the most extreme way possible of saying she no longer believed in him. Dumbledore is sitting there and you can practically see him questioning every decision he's ever made. We've already got him on suicide watch."

This saw Tonks enquiring about the other prisoner, her boss' disgust was plain to see. "If there is one person currently in Azkaban I would like to see kissed by a dementor, then it is Severus Snape. It's hard to say who that man hates most, Harry, his father or his godfather. He really was looking forward to seeing Sirius kissed last summer and also wanted the Potter line to die with Harry. The man has no morals whatsoever. Why Dumbledore thought this thing was suitable to be in charge of children is as much a mystery as it is a disgrace."

"It's hard to take that so many death eaters escaped without any punishment yet I found myself in Azkaban. The corruption in our society goes all the way to the top, and everyone just accepts it as normal. That more than anything has to change."

"I think Fudge is finished. The entire country heard that he'd given Dumbledore a ministerial pardon and only Harry's quick thinking saw them get what they deserve. We're concentrating on the demise of Voldemort but putting our own house in order will quickly follow. Snape gave us a lot of information on his death eater compatriots but so far we've not been able to do much about it. With Dumbledore now in Azkaban and the end of Voldemort closing in, we will be rounding these criminals up when Harry and Hermione finish him off."

Their discussion was interrupted by Winky with a Gringotts owl for Amelia. "I can't believe this, I have a meeting with Ragnok today at one. They have also asked if I could bring Harry and Hermione with me. It would seem we gave more information away yesterday than we thought."

Sirius was concerned whether they would be able to attend but Tonks disagreed. "I think this is exactly what they need, something to take their mind off this. If possible, I would like to see some of their friends here this weekend?" She left to see how her charges were, and give them the news.

Amelia too had to leave, though promised to be back in time to collect the young couple for their visit to Gringotts.

-oOoOo-

Both searchers were beginning to get frustrated. The detector had unerringly led them to the seventh floor yet, the minute they got there, it began acting up. The unspeakable had never seen anything like this. "It's almost like one minute its there and the next not, anything on your map?"

Remus shook his head by way of an answer, all he was getting from the map was the two of them walking up and down an empty corridor. "Perhaps we should have brought Harry and Hermione with us, they seem to have all the answers?"

This drew a chuckle from Croaker. "There is no reason to doubt they would have eventually found it. They did after all discover the chamber of secrets, and that had been hidden for a millennium."

"You really do rate them that highly?"

"If they complete seven years of Hogwarts, they will undoubtedly be the top two students in the school. Whichever order they finish in, only those two will decide. Both are incredibly powerful and, while Miss Granger is frighteningly bright, Mr Potter's insightful way of looking at things makes them a brilliant team."

Remus couldn't argue with that. "Sound's as if you've already got your eye on them as future unspeakables?"

"I have, and they know this. Amelia has also offered them jobs in her department, and that was before most of this kicked off. We both know they are only going to get better as they mature so got in quickly before they were flooded with offers. I can't wait to see just how powerful any children they have will be."

"Do you really buy into that theory?"

"Oh, in this case, most definitely. I don't accept all the pureblood nonsense though, that just illustrates what can happen when a good, sensible idea is taken to extremes."

Remus had never heard this argument before so was eager to learn more. Croaker loved talking over his theories with people intelligent enough to understand them, and open enough to listen. He wasn't going to pass up on this opportunity.

"In the early days of magic, our ancestors must have noticed that a child produced from the union of a witch and wizard resulted in a magically more powerful offspring than if they only had one magical parent. The pureblood philosophy that generations of magical ancestors increased this effect is where all the trouble starts. They casually ignore the initial power of the parents and, more importantly, just how closely those same parents are related. This isn't a sound theory they adhere rigidly to, nor is it a religion, it's a recipe for disaster that leaves our society in the state we are in today."

Remus thought he had the gist of it but wanted to make sure. "So you're saying any kids should be powerful because their parents are powerful, and the only way their family history enters into the equation is that they're not related before marriage?"

"Yes, while nothing in life is ever certain, I think the numbers certainly favour that outcome. Had they been cousins, there would have been a lot of other factors that would introduce degrees of uncertainty to those same numbers. The entire concept of pureblood supremacy is so flawed as to be laughable. That its supposed champion had a muggle father just about sums up the credibility of their entire argument."

Those comments set Remus thinking. "I suppose it's ironic that Voldemort's first defeat was masterminded and executed by a muggleborn witch, and then his final demise will be brought about by another. All due to their love of the same wizard too!"

Croaker hadn't really thought about the current situation in those terms before, he liked it though as this appealed to his sense of neatness and justice.

Remus' frustration was now beginning to show at their lack of results, people were counting on him and he didn't want to disappoint. All he could think of was he needed to find that horcrux while he repeatedly walked up and down the corridor, studying his surroundings for any hidden passages. Croaker's "Where the hell did that come from?" had Remus spinning around to see a large ornate oak door where there was previously only stone wall.

As the horcrux detector indicated this was where they needed to go, both headed through the door and entered an Aladdin's cave of discarded objects. It would have been so easy to become distracted with the immense hidden treasures the vast chamber contained yet both wizards managed to retain their focus. They were on a mission and that came first. Both intended to return here and explore their discovery fully though, once they figured out how they got in here in the first place.

The detector was once more working perfectly and led them unerringly to an object that Croaker recognized immediately. The former Ravenclaw had trouble believing what his eyes were telling him. "That's Rowena Ravenclaw's lost diadem, its been missing since the time of the founders." His spell then confirmed the worst. "It's also a horcrux, which means we're going to have to destroy it."

Remus understood not wanting to destroy a priceless founder's relic though, to finally destroy Voldemort he would wipe out a castle full of them. The unspeakable levitated the item into his protected bag before heading back toward the exit. All thoughts of searching through the vast room were now forgotten, due to the unenviable task facing the former Claw. Being remembered throughout history as the man who destroyed Ravenclaw's diadem was not something Croaker had contemplated when he'd gotten out of bed this morning.

-oOoOo-

Tonks had been half right, giving the couple something to do had helped them recover from the shock of McGonagall's death. Harry's comment that they could use this trip to Gringotts to get Hermione an engagement and wedding ring instantly completed that journey as once more excitement reigned.

Amelia was rather surprised to discover two chirpy teens on her return, she was not surprised in the slightest that Tonks insisted on

accompanying them. She was soon very grateful for her young auror's insistence as the portkey deposited them on the steps of Gringotts bank. Their sudden appearance drew quite a bit of interest but Amelia could certainly have done without the green killing curse that tried to close their accounts.

Tonks pushed her two charges out of the curse's path, and in the direction of the bank doors. Harry and Hermione didn't need telling twice, they raced into the relative safety of the enormous marble building. Amelia meanwhile was laying down some covering fire, shooting stunner after stunner in the direction the curse had originated from. The two goblin security guards also took off in that direction so Amelia followed them into Gringotts where the quartet soon found themselves surrounded by a goblin security squad. As their razor sharp weapons were all pointing away from the four in the centre, they felt it safe to assume the goblins were there on protection detail.

The shaken quartet were led directly into Ragnot's office where the goblin leader awaited them. Harry didn't even take the offered seat before demanding to know what had just happened. His question was directed at Amelia but it was actually Ragnot who offered an answer.

"Please take a seat and I will explain. I'm afraid Monday's trial painted a very large target on you Mr Potter."

This saw both Harry and Hermione slump onto a large chair, not caring if they were sharing upset anyone. They had almost been killed again and needed the comfort of holding on to each other.

When the room settled, Ragnot took up his tale. "Mr Potter has already experienced the trouble a magically binding contract can cause, I'm afraid those troubles are far from over."

Hermione couldn't accept that. "Harry's out of that competition. Professor Moody's impersonator paid the price with his magic, that takes Harry out of that contract."

"You are of course correct Miss Granger, I was referring to other contracts which you have just discovered can be just as deadly."

They were interrupted by a goblin entering the room and speaking with Ragnot in their native tongue, the goblin leader translated as his officer left. "I'm afraid your attacker got away, your DMLE are now on site and wish to interview you all when we are finished here. After you hear what I'm about to say, you'll probably want to perform those interviews inside Gringotts."

Amelia just nodded to acknowledge Ragnot's generosity, she had no intention of giving any assassins another shot at the two teens.

"The magical contracts I am referring to are the ones between the dark lord and his marked followers. They swore on their magic to serve him always and, should Voldemort meet his final demise, that's what it will cost them. They of course didn't realize that when they agreed but that won't matter now, a contract is a contract."

Hermione caught on at once. "Oh shit! We went and announced to the entire country that Harry's just about to finish him off for good. They don't know that killing Harry will do the exact thing they're trying to avoid."

This had Ragnok sitting back in his chair. "Ah, It is as I feared then. You intend to perform a soul bound ritual to force the piece of Voldemort out of Mr Potter?"

Amelia fielded this question. "That was our intention, after we disposed of all the other pieces. Do you foresee a problem with this?"

"Unfortunately yes. Driving a horcrux out by destroying the object cannot be defended against, Mr Potter is an entirely different case. Voldemort survives as a wraith because he can draw a trickle of magic from all his marked followers. That is the force you have to defeat if you wish Mr Potter to survive the expulsion, the combined magic of all the death eaters."

Hermione was now on her feet, everyone could hear the pleading in her voice. "Please sir, please tell us you have a way to do this?"

"We have a way to help Miss Granger, but it will require an even bigger sacrifice on your part."

Harry was beside her before Hermione could answer. "Hold on Hermione, this is one of those things we discuss as a couple. I'm the one who dives into things without thinking, remember?"

"Well said Mr Potter. I also need to ask Madam Bones just how serious the ministry is on destroying Voldemort, now that you know some of your most prominent citizens will lose their magic?"

Amelia didn't hesitate. "The main focus of my department is to bring down Voldemort, and his organization. We were coming here today because we think the final piece of the puzzle may be held in a Gringotts vault..."

The goblin leader cut her off. "You have the full support of the goblin nation on this matter, Voldemort is an enemy of us all. I'm sure we can work out procedures that lie within our banking treaties."

Hermione was holding Harry's hand as she asked the question they needed to know the answer to. "Sir, what sacrifice do I need to make to help Harry?"

Both teens paled as they heard the price they would need to pay, Hermione recovered first. "Okay Harry, but you get to tell my dad."

"Oh shit! He'll probably just kill me on the spot, save the death eaters the trouble."

Hermione didn't give a fig about protocol at the moment, she kissed Harry before stating her demands. "Just make sure you've got another ring on my finger first Potter, my father would never kill my fiancé."

This even drew a smile from the goblin leader. "Assuming Mr Potter survives his encounter with Miss Granger's father, I shall begin plans at once for the ceremony. When would be the best time?"

Hermione blushed as she realized all eyes were on her, and what she was actually being asked. "Probably the weekend, isn't there spells to determine that?"

"Yes, but we want as little magic as possible to interfere with this. That gives us a few days to search the vaults..."

It was now Amelia's turn to cut across the goblin leader. "Actually, we've created a horcrux detector that should lead us directly to where it's hidden."

That really drew a smile from Ragnok though Tonks missed all the byplay, her entire focus was on the young couple staring into each other's eyes. She just had to ask. "Are you two sure about this?"

The determination in Hermione was there for all to see. "Yes, I will not lose my Harry over something the both of us want anyway. He still gets to tell my dad though, but this time I'll be there."

"I think I better sit in on that one too!"

This gave Harry an idea. "Do you think Ragnok would lend us that squad of guards that escorted us in here?"

-oOoOo-

Tonks led Harry and Hermione back home, only to walk straight into an emotional storm. Emma was sobbing uncontrollably while Dan appeared ready to kill dragons with his bare hands. Hermione shot towards her mum, hoping to learn what the problem was. She was even more worried on discovering that her mother was so distraught as to be unable to speak. Her father though had no such problems and was ready for a good loud rant.

"The bastards just destroyed our home. Matt Davies called me on my cell phone. Said he saw a couple of strange characters hanging about the back garden so phoned the police. While he was on the phone, the entire house just burst into flames. Matt said it was an inferno and nothing could have survived that, everything's gone."

This was also hard on Harry. "I'm sorry Mr Granger. This is my fault but I can pay to have your house rebuilt..."

"This is not your fault Harry. Sirius explained that we were at war, now I believe him. The house was well insured but that's not the point. It's the fact these bastards will get away with destroying our home that's driving me crazy."

Tonks couldn't think of a worst time but they all needed to know. "The war visited us today as well, a killing curse was fired at these two on the steps of Gringotts."

This saw Sirius shoot out his seat and engulf his godson in a hug. "We're okay Sirius, Tonks hustled us right into the bank while Madam Bones blasted away at whoever attacked us. Like here though, they got away"

Emma was clinging onto her daughter, she was distraught for another reason rather than the guilty not being punished. "All our memories and mementoes were in that house. How can insurance pay for the loss of Hermione's baby pictures? Those are priceless and irreplaceable."

Like Tonks, Hermione couldn't think of a worst time to bring this subject up but it had to be done. "What if I told you we had a way to make every guilty wizard and witch pay, end the war and replace those baby pictures?"

In the resulting silence, Tonks let her wand slip unnoticed into her hand and hoped Dobby was still in 'protect Harry' mode.

Dan quietly answered his daughter, the fervour of revenge clearly visible in his eyes. "I think that is something we would all really like to hear."

Harry kept his promise to his new fiancée and told her father, the scream of 'WHAT?' could probably have been heard all the way to the ministry of magic.

A/N Thanks for reading

A/N 2 - For some reason I can't remember, I found myself re-reading Knowledge is Power. I actually couldn't finish it and was dismayed at just how badly I'd written this story. I considered taking the whole thing off the net but decided to go for a re-write. I won't be posting it as a different story, rather replacing the chapters one at a time. I won't be changing the plot much but there were a few things that definitely irked me and needed fixing, as well as the horrendous grammar. Hope to have the first 4/5 chapters changed this week

Chapter 16

"Okay, I'm calm. Now kindly tell your little thug here to release me."

Dobby just glared at Dan, that Hermione's father was currently magically restrained to a chair brought him down nearer the elf's height. "You will not harm Harry Potter, Dobby is following his orders to protect his master."

"Yeah? Well this same master of yours wants to knock-up my fifteen year old daughter on Saturday night, I think I'm entitled to at least punch him out." Dan then returned his rage to its main focus. "Tell me again why this has to happen?"

Harry perfectly understood Dan's anger so repeated the story for the third time. "If we don't have enough power between us to force Voldemort out of my head, then we lose. I'll be dead, with Hermione and Tonks only seconds behind me. He'll then come out that room and start killing everyone he sees."

"Now explain to me again, remembering I'm a simple dentist, how impregnating my daughter makes this bad man go away?"

Trying to keep his cool was difficult, Dan referring to Voldemort as a 'bad man' was not helping. Didn't he grasp just how serious this was? "Creating a life is the most magical event in the world. Our magic will recognise this and react accordingly. As love is the power Voldemort knows not, this should also tip the scales heavily in our favour."

Harry was starting to get angry too, he'd had this entire senario dumped on him just after a death eater shot a killing curse at them both. "You asked me the other day if I really could have killed Snape and I honestly wasn't sure. Let me tell you this though, if it was my family's lives that were on the line I would blow his fucking head clean off his shoulders. No questions, no hesitation, I will fight to protect what's mine."

Dan was getting his first glimpse of the wizard who'd faced trolls, basilisk and a dragon. This was Hermione's future they were talking about here though, so Dan had no intention of giving an inch. "What happened to the lad who was going to walk away from Hermione, rather than cause trouble for her family?"

If anything, this saw Harry stand that bit straighter. Dan had intended to have a 'facts of life' talk with the young wizard, Harry was now getting ready to return the favour. He was sure Hermione's father wasn't going to like this either. "I had the error of my ways rather forcibly pointed out to me, and it's just as well Hermione did."

The magic started to pour off Harry as he was becoming visibly emotional. "Had I actually left, your daughter, your wife and you would probably be dead right now. Those death eaters burned your house down because they couldn't get hold of you. Today in Diagon Alley, Hermione and I were meant to die. I'm really sorry you and your family have been dragged into this sir, but you need to understand the situation that we're now in right up to our necks. I have been told by people I respect and trust that this is our best chance of surviving this situation, I will do whatever it takes to make sure Hermione is safe and well. She's easily the most important person in the world to me and I will protect her with my life."

Watching the young man in front of him, Dan could easily believe that. He turned his attention to Sirius, looking for some support. "What's your take on this?"

Sirius could lend some authority to his answer, this was one area he certainly had expertise in. "I know these people Dan, some of them are even related to me. That's why I ran away at sixteen to stay with Harry's father and was on the opposite side of the last war. Had you been home today there would have been one of two outcomes. Emma would have been raped and tortured in front of you while they tried to find information on where these two were hiding. The other outcome is actually worse."

Dan, who was already on a short fuse, exploded at this. "How the fuck do you get worse than that?"

The muggle once more had the facts of life concerning death eater behaviour explained to him. "By using the imperius curse on you, they could have forced you to carry-out whatever perversion they concocted. Imagine Hermione giving you a hug, you then take out a concealed blade and slash her throat wide open. You would know what you were doing but be unable to stop yourself. They use this curse on wizards and witches too during the last war, with devastating effects. That's why Harry paid a fortune for those

necklaces Hermione and Susan wear. Harry here has such an aversion to being controlled he can throw the curse off, it also helps that he's immensely powerful too."

Dan felt physically sick at the very mention of that curse. His glance shifted to his wife and daughter, both of whom had clung to each other since Hermione returned from the bank. Emma made her feelings on the matter quite clear. "Do I think they're too young for this, definitely! Do I want them to wait until they are older, not a chance. My little girl has almost been killed twice in the last few weeks, if making me a grandmother can put a stop to that threat then it gets my vote."

She kissed Hermione on the forehead before continuing to explain her reasoning to her husband. "I know this is not what we had imagined for Hermione but I just want her to live. A baby might be forever Dan but so is Hermione being dead, I know which option I prefer. Tonks here has now saved her life twice, how can we possibly not trust what she tells us? Every single person in this room has the best interests of our daughter at heart."

Tonks was also able to give Dan her honest assessment, pitying the father for the impossible situation they all found themselves in. "It really hurts me to say this Dan but I can't guarantee their safety if Harry or Hermione stick one foot outside this house. We also don't know who we can trust at the ministry. Apart from Croaker, Madam Bones doesn't plan on telling anyone else what the consequences of Harry being free of the horcrux will be."

Dan began to understand the seriousness of the situation when the head of government wasn't being told just what was happening. This was his daughter's future though, and his concern for Hermione swamped everything else.

The young auror attempted to explain further. "Without magic, these people will find themselves unable to access their funds in Gringotts. Most of them will find the wards of their own homes will deny them access, far less allow them to continue living there. Harry would have been able to survive without magic but these people won't, they simply don't know anything else. That is why the ritual is planned for midnight on Saturday, the ministry will be as empty as we can make it. Ragnok is providing security as the goblins are the only ones we can trust not to be death eaters. They will also be

warding the ritual room to stop Voldemort being able to draw magic from his marked servants."

Hermione rose from her position beside her mother, gave Harry a reassuring kiss as she passed, before kneeling at her father's side. "Dad, you're forgetting I'm a witch. This is a different situation for me."

"How is this different Hermione? Your mother gave birth to a witch and I remember the process as if it was yesterday, it didn't seem any different to me."

"Yes dad, the biology is the same but everything else is different."

She then attempted to explain this to the other man she loved. "When I leave that room on Sunday morning, I will be Mrs Hermione Jane Potter, legally married to my husband. There is also the fact that my husband-to-be is rather wealthy, we're talking millions here dad. How many other sixteen year old mothers can claim that much?"

"Money isn't everything love, I thought we taught you that?"

"You did dad, along with many other things that I will be eternally grateful for. What I meant was that this will not be the end of my education, we can have tutors, return to school or even attend university if we want. Having a baby won't be the end of our lives, not having one might be. This will save me, you, mum and Harry, and it's only the timing that's unfortunate. I was always going to have children with Harry so how could I possibly say no to this?"

Hermione sensed she might be getting through to her father so unleashed the big guns. "We also have something other young muggle family's could only dream about, a couple of magical family members who will look after us and our baby. What do you think about Harry and I starting a family Dobby?"

The smile Dobby wore at that question left no one in any doubt of the elf's opinion, he answered his mistress anyway. "Dobby and Winky would love to be helping raise little Potters."

At that point, Winky popped in and agreed wholeheartedly with Dobby. As she took Dobby's hand though, Hermione wondered if

the female elf had plans to raise some little Potters or Blacks of her own. Hermione certainly had her own agenda at the moment and couldn't allow herself to be sidetracked. Getting her father on board was vital and she was prepared to go to any lengths to achieve her aims.

"This baby will have parents who adore them, a godfather who will dote on them and an Aunt Tonks who will pull funny faces until they laugh themselves silly. As much as we'll rely on Dobby and Winky for help, this baby is going to need their grandparents. My Harry spent his first ten years of life living in a cupboard, Sirius' family was so bad he ran away. With Tonks not too much older than us, who else have Harry and I got that we can depend on to keep us on the right track?"

Dan was openly crying as Hermione rested her head on his shoulder. Dobby released the body bind and her father's arms snaked around her. "I'm sorry darling, I only ever wanted the best for you."

"Dad, that's exactly what I've got, I'm going to have everything I ever wanted. This is a new beginning for all of us. It's not just phoenixes who can rise from the ashes, our family will too."

Dan's nod of acceptance was the signal for a lot of the tension to leave the room, Sirius though had something else that had to be said right now.

"Dan and Emma, you need to close your dental practice right now. If they can find your house, that will be their next logical step. So far we've been lucky and avoided any deaths, you need to do this before the death eaters solve your receptionist problem permanently."

Both could see immediately that Sirius was right. If they burned down their house, the practice would be next. Unfortunately, it wouldn't be empty. Dan grabbed his cell phone, hoping they could get everyone out of there before disaster struck.

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Amelia and Croaker cast every silencing charm they knew on her office but both still spoke in whispers. "Are you sure about this Amelia?"

"Who knows magical contracts better than the goblins? If they say that's what will happen, I believe them."

"That wasn't what I meant, doing this could devastate our society. Families will be torn asunder and some bloodlines could even be wiped out."

"The death eaters practiced their own form of genocide for years, we're just going to finish the job and do it legally too. My department has been tasked by the minister and the Wizengamot to put an end to Voldemort for good, that's exactly what we're going to do on Saturday night. You're not going soft on me are you?"

"Just playing devil's advocate here Amelia, I wanted to see if you had thought through the consequences. Our world could be a very different place come Sunday morning."

The smile on Amelia's face was almost feral in her anticipation of revenge. "My family were certainly not alone in suffering at the hands of these bastards. To see people still walking the streets when we both know they've murdered innocent witches and wizards is something that has tormented me for years. They may have escaped Azkaban but this is one form of justice their position, gold and family name can't protect them from. In the next few weeks, I was going to be sending out my aurors to arrest these dangerous criminals. That task just got a hundred times easier so don't expect me to feel any sympathy for them."

"I'll go to Gringotts first thing in the morning. With the goblins assisting us, we could be horcrux free by tomorrow evening. Excepting Harry of course, I assume that you're keeping him safe?"

"He's for all intents and purpose under house arrest. Apart from Auror Tonks, I can't be absolutely certain of anyone else. Even aurors I've known for years could be tempted by the vast sums the death eaters would pay to get their hands on Harry. The next time they leave that house will be Saturday night when they come here. After the day they've just had, I didn't have too much trouble convincing them to stay put."

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After absorbing the shock of McGonagall's death, the castle was also agog next morning as the Daily Prophet proclaimed that Harry Potter and Hermione Granger had lucky escapes in Diagon Alley. Susan approached the Gryffindor table, almost in tears.

"I just got a letter from my Aunt Amelia and it's all true, Tonks barely managed to push Harry and Hermione out of the path of a killing curse."

Ginny also had tears threatening to escape. " They just can't seem to catch a break, how bad have things gotten when you can't walk down Diagon Alley without someone trying to kill you?"

Their discussion suffered an interruption at this point by an unannounced visitor to Hogwarts. "Oh it's worse than that Miss Weasley, I also had to stop them writing replies to their friends. I simply couldn't take the chance of any information leaking out, we really need to keep them safe and secure."

Amelia felt terrible for doing that to Harry and Hermione, so had come to Hogwarts herself to explain to their friends. Harry and Hermione were putting their very lives on the line, Amelia felt it was the least she could do. There was also another reason for her being here though, after giving Susan a quick hug she headed for the headmistress.

"Headmistress Sprout, I'm afraid I must take one of your students and a professor into protective custody."

Pomona wasn't about to let just anyone walk out the castle with one of her students. "Only if you have the proper paperwork and signed parental consent Madam Bones."

This actually drew a smile from Amelia as she handed over a scroll, Pomona's attitude softened the instant she read it.

"I feel a lot happier with you in charge of the castle Pomona, you keep right on putting everyone in their place. I'm sending you an auror to teach Remus' classes until he can return, and I can't give you any clue as to when that return will be."

Pomona caught on quickly to what Amelia was doing here. "You are taking the people who know Mr Potter's whereabouts into protective custody, are things really that far along?"

"I'm afraid so, the death eaters will stop at nothing to get a hold of him. I'm closing down any and all potential sources of information."

Remus was at least aware of what was actually going on, current up until yesterday that is, so happily went with Amelia. Susan was still talking at the Gryffindor table though there appeared quite the crowd present now. There was no easy way to say this, and it would paint a target on Susan, but it had to be done.

"Susan, I'm afraid I need to remove you from Hogwarts."

This stopped all conversation but it was Ginny who blurted the reason out. "Of course, you know where Harry is? You didn't tell anyone, did you?"

"Certainly not!"

"Oh I'm sorry Susan, I know you would never say anything. We're all just worried about Harry and Hermione. Madam Bones, could you tell them not to worry about answering our letters, we all understand."

One of the main purposes of her visit appeared to be accomplished as Ginny's suggestion met with lots of agreement. "They said that they had great friends, you just proved that Miss Weasley. They are well and will be in touch as soon as it's safe to do so."

Remus and Susan walked out the hall with Amelia, both reckoning they would end up in Crawley and also that they wouldn't be staying there too long.

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Breakfast that morning in Crawley was a strange one, especially when Harry and Hermione plonked a large carved stone bowl in the middle of the table. It appeared to be full of something like watery soup and Dan had already decided to give this wizarding delicacy a miss. Hermione though seemed particularly excited about this dish.

"Sirius told us about these things last night and Dobby managed to buy one. We know yesterday was hellish for you both so this is a gift from Harry and me."

Neither Dan nor Emma had the slightest idea how to respond to that, everything changed though when Hermione touched the bowl with her wand. The Granger parents were each rendered incapable of speech.

Both were mesmerised as they watched a four-year-old Hermione playing at making sandcastles with Emma while Dan was cooking lunch on the barbecue. Dan remembered the incident well, it was just the day before he'd put the sand pit in their back garden. Emma also remembered that after lunch, she and Hermione would splash each other in the large paddling pool. That was before filling Hermione's pail with water and chasing Dan around the garden while their daughter's laughter spurred them on.

Here were real three-D images, in full colour and with sound. It was so realistic, it instantly transported any watcher into the scene. It was astoundingly accurate, magnificently detailed and must have cost a king's ransom to enable the figures to manoeuvre around the bowl. It was almost as if the 'soup' was the stage and their younger selves performed on top of it.

"Harry, this is so thoughtful and absolutely fantastic, but we can't possibly accept this..."

The wizard in question instantly cut Dan off before he could say anymore. "Sir, I won't pretend that this wasn't expensive, but it's what's placed inside it that's priceless. I think what we are trying to say is that the only thing that's irreplaceable is life itself. Did I get that right love?"

Harry found himself being kissed by the other Granger girl. "I think you got it just perfect Harry."

"Could we give the 'sir' a miss Harry and try Dan? I don't think either of us are quite ready for dad just yet."

Hermione was ecstatic at this development, her mother kissing Harry while her father held out an olive branch, and then Sirius

decided to get involved. Placing a silvery memory into the bowl, he offered a suggestion.

"Why don't you just earmark it as the family pensieve?"

At that, his memory started to play and it was an emotional group who watched the wedding of Lily Evans to James Potter.

Hermione was snuggling in Harry's arms as the memory finished playing, witnessing that beautiful yet simple ceremony saw her reach an important decision. "Harry, I want to get married. I want to be Mrs Potter before walking into that room on Saturday night."

She was going to get no argument from Harry on this. "I've got the ring love, but I don't know how to arrange the rest."

Their family came rushing to the rescue with Tonks getting the ball rolling.

"Madam Bones has the legal power to marry couples."

Sirius quickly chipped in with the next suggestion. "We could hold the ceremony here?"

Emma raised the problem about a dress before Winky popped in and announced she could make any dress the mistress required. Dobby was right behind her with an offer to bake and decorate their wedding cake. it was already a given that the elves would be catering for any reception.

All eyes then turned to Dan for his opinion, the tears he was struggling to hold onto were a major clue. "I'll get to give my little girl away on her wedding day!"

Amelia, Susan and Remus weren't sure what to expect when they entered the Potter / Black household, laughter and excitement weren't exactly high on their lists though.

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Draco Malfoy was ignoring everything that was happening around him, attacks and suicides meant nothing to the Slytherin when compared to the letter held in his hand. His mother just had their

worst fears officially confirmed. Lucius had done a runner out the country with the Malfoy family wealth, leaving them homeless and broke. She was currently staying in a rented room at the Leaky Cauldron, and had to sell some of her jewellery to be able to afford even that.

Uncertain wasn't nearly a strong enough word to describe their future though Draco was already positive Hogwarts wouldn't feature in his. They would need a roof over their heads and food on the table more than paying for him to be away for most of the year. Add in the expense of school supplies and such, well there wasn't really a decision to be made.

His tuition was already paid for the rest of this term, giving his mother some breathing space to try and plot a future for their diminishing family unit. What that future would be was currently out of Draco's hands. What he did know though was that he hoped to meet his father sometime in the future, Draco would love a chance to remind the selfish bastard of a lesson that had been drummed into him since he was a toddler. That lesson was you never crossed a Malfoy, not and still expect to live that is.

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It was a delighted Amelia who quickly agreed to perform the wedding ceremony but she had to scupper their other plans.

"I understand your reasoning that it wouldn't really matter, since it will all be over on Sunday, but I still have to say no. The Durmstrang headmaster is a death eater who escaped prison by informing on everyone he knew. If he's smart enough to avoid Azkaban and then hold a headmaster's job, he's clever enough to understand what's going on if all your friends suddenly start leaving Hogwarts."

Amelia held her hands out to avoid their interruptions before she could explain her reasoning fully. "At the moment the death eaters aren't organised, we believe some won't even be aware of what will happen to them when we finally rid the world of Voldemort. The last thing we want to do is give them any hint of our timescale. As Mr Krum is his student, we would have to inform Karkaroff of when Victor would be returning. This development could change worried death eaters into frantic animals, animals that would do anything to survive. How would we be expected to respond if they snatched a

group of children and demanded Harry as the price of the kids safe release? I will aid you in anyway I can but, as head of the DMLE, I can't sanction risking innocent lives so your friends can attend your wedding."

Remus, like everyone there could see how much this hurt the young couple. Perhaps it was holding a certain map in his hands again after all this time that caused the defence professor to let his inner marauder out to play for the first time in years. "Madam Bones, perhaps I could make a suggestion that may help?"

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Ron Weasley was having a bad day. That someone tried to kill his two best friends was certainly the start of it, now he would have to wait even longer to discover if they accepted his apology for not writing sooner. His day though just got worse as their stand-in DADA professor appeared to take an instant dislike to him.

Jibes coming in his direction all period were hard enough to ignore but the mention of an impromptu duelling tournament was the last straw. As there were an uneven number of students in the class, Ron got to take on the large black auror who'd been on his case from the instant he walked in the door. Not only that, they were going to be up first.

They were making preparations to begin dueling when the auror got close enough to Ron so that only the redhead could hear what was being said. Ron then discovered why this geezer with the bald head and hoop earring took an instant personal dislike to the youngest male Weasley.

"I'm stuck here with you snot-nosed brats because everyone has their knickers in a twist concerning Harry bloody Potter. Well I'm just going to console myself by kicking his best friend's arse all over this classroom. I can only hope that the next death eater to take a pop at Potter is a better shot."

Ron's firey temper was well known, and his reaction to the auror's remarks utterly predictable. The Gryffindor exploded in pure rage and began screaming obscenities while firing curses at the auror, an auror who was unfortunately far too well trained and experienced for

the fourth year student to make any impression. Ron was disarmed and in a full body bind within a matter of moments.

"Pathetic, if that's all this class has got to offer then it's a good job I'm here. Not that this will be your concern anymore Mr Weasley, take this note to the headmistress at once. Oh, and take your stuff with you, you won't be coming back."

Ron was heading toward the spiral staircase with his head down, thinking this day couldn't get any worse when the headmistress once more proved him wrong. "Mr Weasley, I can't tell you how disappointed I am in you. After putting all your earlier detentions behind you, I thought we had turned a corner with your behaviour. Clearly I was wrong. You leave me no other option but to suspend you from Hogwarts."

Ron was handed a portkey and didn't even have time to say anything in his defence before feeling the now familiar hook behind his navel. Ron then naturally assumed he was in a lot more trouble than he first thought possible. This assumption was understandable, considering he was obviously in the Head of the DMLE's office and Madam Bones had her wand trained on him.

It was only after the spell washed over Ron that the scary witch smiled and lowered her wand. "My apologies for the subterfuge Mr Weasley but it was necessary. No auror of mine would ever behave so unprofessionally as your defence professor just did, but we needed a viable reason to get you out of Hogwarts without raising anyone's suspicion. As you can probably guess, the story of you being sent home will be all over the castle by dinner tonight. Doing it the way we did should put you in the clear."

"Madam Bones, can you please tell me what the bloody hell is going on? What was that spell you hit me with?"

"That spell Mr Weasley scanned you for tracking or monitoring charms. Your father gave his permission for this to happen, though it cost him a secrecy oath and he doesn't know where you will be going."

"Where will I be going?"

"Wherever this portkey takes you."

Ron wasn't really happy with that answer but didn't seem to have too much choice in the matter. He took hold of the object Madam Bones gave him and once again felt the hook behind his navel. His ribs being crushed soon replaced this feeling and his vision was blocked off by a mass of wavy brown hair. His eardrums also underwent an assault as Hermione's scream of greeting nearly deafened him.

"Oh Ron, it's so good to see you."

Hermione let him go and then Harry was shaking his hand. "Got a favour to ask you mate. Hermione and I are getting married tomorrow and I need a best man?"

The combination of seeing Harry and Hermione again, and also what he was being asked, nearly had Ron's eyes bulging out his head. All he could managed was one word. "Really?"

This one word though was enough to set Hermione off as she attempted to explain the situation to Ron in under thirty seconds. "Well, I know we're not exactly the proper ages to get married but, after what happened at the ministry trial, they're allowing us do this. Apparently there are some old laws regarding Harry being the last male survivor of ..."

"Hermione stop! What I meant was do you really want me to be best man at your wedding? I've been a bit of a prat this year."

Both grabbed an arm each and led him from the front steps of the house into the entrance hall. "Who else would I ask Ron? It wouldn't feel right if you weren't there. You'll be wearing a tux, just like the one I got at Christmas. Winky will be measuring you later and making a copy of mine to fit you."

They chatted away as the trio mended some fences from earlier in the year. They both had felt it was appropriate to inform Ron about horcruxes, but neither was comfortable talking about what would happen on Saturday night at the ministry. It wasn't that Harry and Hermione didn't trust Ron with the information about the ritual, they just didn't want to be in the same room as their friend when his head exploded from embarrassment.

A/N Thanks for reading

A/N 2 I stopped updating Knowledge is Power because rather a lot of people wanted me to post the edited version as a new story, leaving the old one as it is. This seems a bit like cheating to me as over ninety percent of the story will remain the same. I decided the best idea was to place a poll on my profile page and let the people who might read it decide. The choice is now yours.

Chapter 17

While getting prepared for her wedding, Hermione was effortlessly switching between tears and tantrums. This was so unlike her daughter that Emma eventually decided to clear the room. With Tonks, Susan and Winky now gone, it was time for a serious mother daughter talk.

"Hermione, if you have any reservations about this whole wedding and ritual scenario, now is the time to speak about them. I remember becoming a bit nuts on my own wedding day, but I didn't have half the things going on that you have at the moment."

"Mum, there's a part of me that wants this with all my heart, Harry is the one for me without question. Then there is another part that's terrified about tonight. I'm spending my wedding night in the ministry, so bloody romantic. Harry and I will make love for the first time under auror guard with practically the fate of the entire country riding on the result. What if I can't do this mum?"

"Being nervous about your wedding and honeymoon is to be expected for any bride. As seems to be becoming the norm for Hermione Granger, you have far more things to be nervous about than any other bride I can think of. What's Harry's take on all this?"

Hermione's deep blush told Emma what the real problem was here. "We haven't really talked about it, there's been so much else going on."

Emma called for Winky and asked her to tell Harry his future wife needed a chat.

"But Mum, Harry can't see my dress."

"Hermione, with everything else that's happening around here, I think that should be the least of your troubles."

A soft knock at the door signalled Harry's arrival, Emma rose to let him in. "Harry, you're shaking. Calm down, there's nothing wrong. I just think you and Hermione need to have a chat before your wedding. I'll be back shortly."

Hermione could clearly see the worry written all over Harry's face, she held her arms open and he rushed right into them. "Sorry for worrying you Harry, I'm just being silly here and mum thought I should talk with you."

"My Hermione being silly, now you've really got me worried. Let's sit down and see if we can sort whatever's bothering you. You look absolutely beautiful, but then I always think that."

Hermione could feel her doubts fading away the moment Harry held her in his arms, now it was time to talk out the few that remained. "I so want to be Mrs Potter but I think it's tonight that's beginning to pray on my mind. This will be our first time. That in itself is pressure enough without all the additional burdens of a soul bond ritual, defeating Voldemort, Tonks being in there with us and then the possibility of me becoming pregnant. What if I can't do all this Harry?"

"I would be lying to you love if I said the very same worries hadn't been praying on my mind too, Winky just wiped all that away though with one phrase. When she said you wanted to see me, I thought you'd finally come to your senses and didn't want to marry me. I shot from being worried straight to terrified out of my mind. You taught me we could cope with anything, as long as we're together. I know tonight will not be how most young couples spend their wedding night, but we're not most young couples. What I do know for certain is that with Mrs Hermione Potter by my side, we can do anything."

Hermione kissed her husband-to-be in a manner that clearly emphasised his fear of rejection was totally groundless. She'd been letting her perfectly natural anxieties run away with her while forgetting the most important thing, Harry would be with her through everything. Harry's use of Mrs Potter had the instant and added effect of destroying all her lingering doubts, Mrs Potter was exactly what she wanted to become. With her future husband sitting here beside her, she was now smiling and looking forward to her wedding. Tonight would take care of itself.

They then talked through what was really bothering them and felt much better for it, both had been worried their spouse would have expectations they couldn't meet. The newly wed Potters would approach tonight one step at a time and face whatever tomorrow brought them.

"I'm really glad I got to see you beforehand. If we'd waited, I probably wouldn't be able to answer Madam Bones when she asks me that all important question later. You are so beautiful, it takes my breath away."

This earned Harry another kiss before Hermione replied. "You're very handsome in that tux too, Lavender and Parvati were almost drooling at that picture of us at the New Year Ball."

"Just wait until they see the wedding pictures, I think your dad has bought about half a dozen cameras. He's passing them out to Sirius, Remus and even Ron got one."

This had Hermione giggling, she couldn't wait to see what type of pictures the marauders and their clueless friend would manage to take with muggle cameras. "How's Ron holding up being best man?"

"Oh Ron's having the time of his life, your dad had to switch the TV off before he would move to get himself ready. MTV might now rival the Canons in Ron's affections. He's talking about putting a boy band together when he gets back to Hogwarts. I just don't see Ron, Neville, Seamus and Dean as Gryffindor's answer to Take That. The snoring in that dorm was bad enough, who knows what racket they could generate trying to sing?"

Emma stuck her head back inside the door to be greeted by the sound of the bride and groom laughing, she signaled to the others that it was safe to return. She thought Harry was surely a great wizard for the magic he had just worked on Hermione. It was with some reluctance that Harry was ushered out the room so they could continue to get ready, Hermione saying she would see him soon settled both their nerves.

Harry was heading back up the corridor when he heard the sound of 'Relight my Fire' blasting out of Ron's room, he wondered if Ginny was going to be drafted in to fill the Lulu role? She certainly had the red hair. He supposed it was a better way for Ron to spend his time before the big event rather than drinking firewhisky with the twins, a lot healthier too. Hermione would literally kill him if he turned up drunk at their wedding.

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Lucius Malfoy was rapidly reaching the conclusion that leaving Britain was the best thing he'd ever done. His covert journeys from country to country had all gone incredibly smoothly, proving once more to the aristocratic pureblood that with enough money you could achieve anything. The only blip on his now constant state of contentment was when the gnomes asked for a next of kin. Lucius eventually put Draco's name down. He may not like the useless little shit but the alternative was unthinkable to the pureblood fanatic. Any money that he didn't manage to spend over the coming decades would automatically revert to the gnomes if he didn't have a named next of kin on his account.

Lucius fully intended to sire another heir, he just wanted to spend a few years having some fun until then. His first night in Bangkok confirmed to him that he'd chosen exactly the right place to have that fun. The city was so busy and vibrant, with everything available for the right price. That Lucius had more than enough gold to meet those very reasonable prices for years to come had him thinking he'd set foot in paradise. Then he discovered the ladyboys of Bangkok and knew for certain he'd reached the Promised Land.

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Dan's shopping trip had been for more than just cameras, Remus had side apperated him to York where he quickly stocked upon some other essentials for his daughter's wedding. While the wonderful elves could handle most things, Dan wanted the proper music for when he walked Hermone to meet her Harry. A powerful stereo system and a bag full of CD's soon solved that problem, he'd already picked the perfect track for the father / daughter dance. They had figured that York, while being far enough away from London and Hogwarts, was still a big enough city for them to blend into without attracting any unwanted attention. Even the ministry couldn't monitor the entire country so they reckoned they would be safe enough.

When it was finally time to enter the ladies dressing area to collect his daughter, Dan had tears in his eyes. Hermione had asked Tonks to be her maid of honour. Considering what the young auror meant to both her and Harry, there really couldn't have been any other choice. Dan deliberately didn't hear the part where they asked her to

be godmother to their first child too, his mind would only go there when it became a fait accompli.

Tonks had responded positively to both requests and now stood in her Dora Granger guise. Hermione had tried to convince her that, since she was going to be family anyway, she should just go with her natural look. She had responded that, since this would be the first pictures in the Grangers new albums, this was a better look for the occasion. The result left Dan thinking he was looking at three of the most beautiful women in the world. His wife was simply stunning while Hermione took her father's breath away. As Tonks was portraying a mixture of both, Dan's hand reached into his pocket for his new camera to take the first picture of the day.

Emma could hardly believe this was the same room they had been eating their meals in every night, the elves had worked wonders. The dining room was now at least twice its original length, with a rose covered archway leading to an altar at the other end. Remus operated the CD player as the bridal march alerted the small wedding party that Hermione was about to make her entrance.

At the other end of the room, Harry and Ron stood waiting with Madam Bones as Dan began leading a beaming Hermione to her future. Harry eventually had to dunt Ron in the ribs. "That's my wife you're ogling, put your eyeballs back in and remember what your here for."

"Bloody hell Harry, Hermione is gorgeous! you are one lucky..."

Madam Bones deliberately clearing her throat ended whatever Ron was going to say next. Harry didn't take umbrage at Ron's outburst, he happened to agree with every word. After all the shit he'd had dumped on him since he was a toddler, Harry genuinely believed today wiped the slate clean. As he watched Hermione approaching on her father's arm, Ron's words rang true to the young groom. Harry Potter was one lucky bastard.

Harry spent the next fifteen minutes staring into the most wonderful brown eyes and responding whenever Madam Bones required him to. When she eventually said he could kiss the bride, he was never as glad to follow anyone's instructions in his life before. The newly married couple eventually parted to loud cheering, their wedding

party might be few in number but they were making enough noise to grace a Hogwarts Quidditch match.

Hermione took the custom of kissing the bride to new heights when she knelt down to kiss Dobby, thanking him and Winky for all their hard work to make today the special occasion it was quickly turning into. Both elves had been stunned to be told they were expected to be part of the celebrations but this was beyond their wildest dreams. Dobby then earned another kiss when he floated in a beautiful wedding cake that bore a striking resemblance to Hogwarts. It was manufactured to scale and the white icing appeared to sparkle under the festive lights the elves had bedecked the room in. The clearly recognisable couple that stood atop the Astronomy Tower were sculpted to a larger scale than that of the castle, Mr and Mrs Potter looked out over Hogwarts.

Susan, like most teenage girls, had thought a lot about getting married and how she wanted her wedding to be. She had originally felt sorry for her two friends who appeared to have been left without any options other than the path they were pursuing. Now, she wasn't so sure. This may be a small wedding but both bride and groom appeared very happy. They couldn't have all the friends they wanted to attend but their families were here, Susan had already decided she wanted her aunt to perform the ceremony when her turn eventually came.

Hermione's dress was just stunning. A combination of white satin and lace, with pearls lovingly embroidered into the bodice. The dress did come out at the hips but not to the extent where she couldn't fit through doors. One of Hermione's main requirements when designing the dress was that she be able to dance close with Harry while wearing it.

Harry had also promised Susan a dance later so, as she sat between her aunt and Croaker for what she was sure would be a wonderful meal, the Hufflepuff had to concede that this was indeed a lovely wedding. Susan was at an age where she realized it wasn't the actual wedding itself that counted, rather the person who you would be spending the rest of your life with. Using that as a yardstick, Hermione and Harry's wedding just jumped to the top of her list of the best weddings she'd ever attended.

Dan and Sirius had taken the time to chat with Harry and Ron beforehand, neither groom nor best man had expressed any enthusiasm for performing speeches at this point of the proceedings. As the father of the bride, Dan was only too happy to say a few words while Sirius could never be accused of shyness.

Dan stood first to deliver his speech. "I originally heard the name Harry Potter from Hermione's first letter sent from Hogwarts, I can assure everyone here we got used to hearing that name over the next few years. It's extremely disconcerting to a father when his daughter is five hundred miles away at boarding school and her two best friends are named Ron and Harry. At one point Emma and I began to wonder if there were any other witches at Hogwarts."

The guests were now laughing while the bride and groom sat there blushing, Dan could only think it was going well so far. "It was only during the last Christmas Holidays we got to meet the young man who'd so clearly won our daughter's heart, and what a first meeting! Harry standing on the train platform going toe to toe with that fraud Dumbledore. We then went to the bank with a bodyguard and heard about betrayal and a betrothal, just your typical day for these two." This drew more laughter but Dan was now getting serious.

"Sadly we were to discover just how true that 'typical day' statement was as these two finally came clean and told us what was really going on, which leads us directly to where we find ourselves today. Through all these tasks, trials and tribulations there has only been one constant that they could rely on, each other. Their commitment, caring and love for one another sees me standing here today as a proud father, welcoming Harry into our family, and asking everyone here to raise their glasses. Please join me in toasting Mr and Mrs Potter, the bride and groom!"

After everyone had toasted the happy couple, Sirius now stood to say his piece. "I first met the lovely Mrs Potter about a year ago and, as first meetings go, I think I've got Dan's beat. You see the entire country thought I was this half-crazy psycho killer who was hell bent on revenging my master's demise. That this would make Harry my main target should give you some idea of where Hermione would be."

Sirius gazed lovingly at the young married couple as he continued. "If you guessed throwing herself in front of Harry with her wand

pointed at me then you got it right. These two then went on to save me from a dementor's kiss not once but twice on the same night. The second time I was locked in Hogwarts castle, trying to meet my end like a Gryffindor, when these two busted me out of there."

This was something Sirius really hadn't spoken about but the emotion of the day was obviously affecting the marauder. "Escaping that fate was like being reborn. I swore to myself that night I would help these two anyway I could, and I intend to continue doing everything in my power to do so. You can perhaps understand why I was delighted when I heard they'd gotten together. I personally owe them a debt I can never repay and, by this time tomorrow, the entire country will too. Dan's already toasted the Bride and Groom but I would like you all to raise your glasses once more and toast our family, a family I consider everyone here a part of."

After the toast, Sirius received a round of applause which saw him pretend to continue. "Oh, I forgot to tell my joke about the one-eyed barman and the stuttering witch..." The fake stern stares from Emma, Tonks and Hermione saw Sirius announcing he would save it for later as he wanted a dance with the bride.

Harry had learned to dance with Hermione in his arms and classical music playing in the background. Now that same music was filling the room as he guided and glided his bride along in rhythm to the timeless classics. The repeated camera flashes signalled their family were taking lots of pictures of the moment but the bride and groom only had eyes for each other. "I loved dancing with Hermione Granger but I think waltzing with Hermione Potter beats that experience hands down."

Hermione intended to start her marriage the way it would continue, by not letting Harry off with that jibe. "I have to say that dancing with Harry Potter was nice, but being here in my husband's arms is so much better."

Harry's wide smile almost turned into laughter as he caught sight of his best man trying to dance with their bridesmaid. Ron wasn't sure where to put his hands and had difficulty focusing his eyes where they were supposed to be. Tonks was chuckling at his discomfort, which didn't help Ron's problem.

"Oh, he's go to dance with me next. that should cool him down a bit."

This comment saw Harry shake his head in disbelief. "Hermione, you are the hottest girl here, I hardly think that's going to help Ron's condition." Hermione was about to refute that but her husband got in first. "I had to practically pick his eyeballs off the floor when he saw you walking toward me. I thought for a second we had made a mistake because 'jealous prick' seemed in danger of making an appearance. He eventually settled for calling me a lucky bastard, a sentiment I happen to totally agree with."

As the music ended, the couple kissed before swapping partners to dance with the best man / maid of honour. Harry drew no pleasure from realising that he was right, Ron didn't handle his dance with Hermione any better than the one with Tonks. After his talk with Hermione, she was obviously a lot more aware of this now too. She was trying to talk to Ron while keeping her blushing to an acceptable level. The young auror currently dancing with the groom of course missed nothing.

"That is why you are able to marry Hermione while Ron can't even dance with her, you two are old souls in young bodies. Ron may grow into a decent young man but Harry Potter is already the finest wizard I've ever met. I understand you and Hermione must be worried about later and I can appreciate that. Personally, I think you two are made for each other and old Voldie doesn't stand a chance. You just look after Hermione and remember I've got your back's covered."

Harry could only hold her tighter as he attempted to get his voice working again. "Thanks Tonks, I really don't know what we would do without you."

"You're both family now Harry, so you'll never have to find out. We're stuck with each other for the rest of our lives."

He couldn't help but think his comment from earlier was just being reinforced, Harry Potter's luck had certainly taken an upturn. That his next dance was with the woman who was now his mother just sealed the deal.

Hermione was in her father's arms when she recognised the music playing, it was one of her mother's favourites. 'I hope you dance' was a song about not playing it safe and taking a chance to get what

you want. This was her father's way of saying he approved of her choices better than his words ever could. The second verse almost had her in tears.

I hope you never fear those mountains in the distance

Never settle for the path of least resistance

Livin' might mean takin' chances, but they're worth takin'

Lovin' might be a mistake, but it's worth makin'...

Dan saw his daughter's reaction and attempted to apologise. "I'm sorry princess, I thought you would like the song..."

"Dad, I love the song, and the message behind it."

"I really do like Harry you know, the fact that he adores you is a big plus in his favour. I just want you both to be happy."

"We are Dad, very happy. Once we get tonight over with, we'll have the rest of our lives to spend happily together. I'm almost sure he and Sirius have cooked up some kind of surprise but both are keeping quiet about it for now."

"Well, I heard the word honeymoon being mentioned but that's all I've got out of them."

Hermione's next dance was actually with Sirius, the marauder though was impervious to her probing questions. All she could get out of him was that the secret would be revealed shortly.

Harry was trying to thank Madam Bones for officiating today as he led her around the dancefloor, she immediately corrected him about a couple of things. "Harry, since we are now dance partners, I think it's time you called me Amelia. I also think the wizarding community of Britain owes you both such a debt of thanks that anything I can do to help redress the balance somewhat will be yours for the asking. It was also my pleasure to do that today. Wedding ceremonies are one of the nicest things about my job yet I get so little chance to practice those skills. Again, it is me who should be thanking you."

He next had a dance with Susan before then sitting down beside Ron to enjoy a much needed butterbeer. "How you doing mate? Glad to see you at least didn't throw up on anyone this time."

"Oh very funny Harry, I'm never going to live that one down. Anyway, Hermione would have killed me if I'd pulled something like that. Your wife is gorgeous, but still bloody scary."

This raised a chuckle from Harry, again he couldn't argue with his mate's reasoning. "Have you had a dance with Susan yet?" Harry knew fine well Ron hadn't so his shake of the head came as no surprise. "Your best man Ron, that means you have responsibilities today. One of them is to keep this function going, that means dancing." It didn't really mean that but Harry was betting Ron didn't know this. He didn't want Ron sitting in a corner all evening like a lemon, especially when there was a beautiful unattached girl waiting to dance.

-oOoOo-

The evening passed quite quickly and it was just after ten when Hermione casually mentioned to Harry that it was time to change. They said their goodnights before heading up to what was now officially their room. Although most of the guests knew what was happening later, Ron was still clueless. As he was now sitting chatting to a beautiful Hufflepuff, it was debatable if he even noticed them leaving.

They reached their bedroom and Harry instantly dispelled any awkwardness by lifting Hermione into his arms and carrying his bride over the threshold. Hermione was doing her best to see Harry's actions as romantic but got an attack of the giggles. Harry's pretend pout took his wife the rest of the way there and both of them soon ended up on the bedroom floor laughing.

Hermione then kissed her husband before making his head spin. "It took three people to get me into this dress, do you think the both of us can manage to get me out of it? I would hate to be shouting for help on our wedding night."

"Oh, I think we should manage."

"Good, I want a shower before we have to get ready to head over to the ministry. I couldn't help noticing your shower should be big enough for both of us, what do you think?"

"I think it's a fantastic idea, but are you sure?"

"You're my husband now Harry, and I don't want our first proper 'looks' at each other to be in the ministry tonight. We can shower together before we go, perhaps get rid of some of the awkwardness we're bound to feel."

Harry recognised Hermione biting her bottom lip meant his wife wasn't nearly as confident as she was trying to portray herself as. "Let's get you out of that dress Mrs Potter and then I will take great delight in washing your back for you."

"Once you're finished with my back, you can move onto my front." Hermione thought for a second she'd broken her husband until his face split into a grin Dobby would be proud of. "We still have to be virgins for the ceremony later but that doesn't mean we can't have some exploration first. I want you to know every inch of me, and I'll be doing the same to you." The poor dress never stood a chance.

Harry gazed in wonder at his wife's naked form. "Hermione, this might be a very long shower?"

"We don't need to be at the ministry until midnight."

Harry's clothes quickly joined his wife's on the floor as they tentatively held each other naked. "I thought you were beautiful in that dress Hermione but my god, I don't have words to say how you look out of it."

The new Mrs Potter was blushing like mad but still wore a very satisfied smile on her face. Seeing her husband's very obvious reaction to her body gave her all the confidence she needed to go through what they had to later. "You don't have to say a word Harry, I get the message."

it was much, much later a pair of very happy, and very clean newlyweds exited the shower.

-oOoOo-

Amelia and Croaker headed back to the ministry to ensure all the preparations were ready for the ritual, leaving the five adults sitting around an open fire and trying not to watch as the clock on the mantelpiece ever so slowly crept its way toward the appropriate time. All five felt as if they could do with a stiff drink but had nothing stronger than fruit juice in their hands. The champagne at the toasts was actually the only alcohol drunk today, everyone wanting a clear head in case they were needed tonight. Remus would be staying behind, Ron and Susan were still in the house, but the other four were all ministry bound with the Potters.

Dan screwed his face up in disgust after drinking the freshly squeezed orange juice, the current situation called for at least a good single malt. He and Sirius had an ancient bottle of the amber nectar put aside for later, after they came back from the ministry. The elves had also secured a bottle of Emma's favourite brandy, they would celebrate only when both Hermione and Harry were safely back in the house. "We think this is bad now, it's going to be a lot worse later waiting outside that door."

The words were out before Tonks even had time to think about it. "Want to trade places with me?"

Dan's shudder of revulsion quickly answered that question as Emma attempted to console the young auror. "I think you got the worst job tonight Tonks but I for one am certainly glad you're going to be in there with them. It's not something Dan or I could do, and I don't think they would want Sirius cracking jokes during their bonding."

Sirius wasn't upset at that quip. "Oh, I'm with Dan on this one, I'd rather be outside the door. I also agree that Tonks is the best person to be in there, both of them trust you with their lives."

Tonks then raised her real fears. "I just hope it won't be awkward between us once we leave that room. I've really got used to having those two in my life, I would hate for anything to spoil the relationship we have."

"Not something you have to worry about Tonks, never going to happen."

The group hadn't noticed the newlyweds enter, Harry's voice making most of them jump. Both of them were dressed in bathrobes with the Potter family crest prominent on each, a pair of slippers finished their ensemble. Hermione's practical mind deciding that there was no point getting dressed, just to take everything back off again.

"I think that now the wedding's over, it's safe to spill the secret of what my godfather and I have been planning. The beautiful Mrs Potter here deserves the best, and that's what she's going to get. The Blacks apparently own their own unplottable tropical island, and that's where we're all heading tomorrow until everything blows over in Britain. Sorry Remus, but you went and got yourself a job."

"A job a certain little bird told me you had a hand in."

"Oh I don't know if I would chance calling Amelia a bird, but I did mention you were the best defence teacher we ever had."

Emma wanted to make sure she had heard Harry correctly. "Let's go back a bit for a minute, did you say we were leaving for a tropical island tomorrow?"

Sirius was rubbish at keeping secrets and now couldn't wait to tell them all about it. "Oh you'll love it Emma. Imagine little palm-thatched cottages beside a snow-white beach. Our only neighbours are palm trees and parrots, we will of course have Dobby and Winky there too!"

Dan thought this sounded too good to be true. "If this island is everything that you say it is, why the hell were you spending the winter freezing your arse off in a Scottish cave?"

Sirius actually blushed at that though Hermione provided the answer. "He was on that island dad, Harry got a note delivered by a tropical bird. Sirius left that paradise to be nearer to Harry after he found himself in that bloody tournament."

All thoughts of tomorrow vanished as the clock began to chime midnight. It was time to take the portkey to the ministry. The next few hours would decide whether tomorrow brought them to a tropical paradise or a funeral parlour.

A/N Thanks for reading.

Chapter 18

The group portkeyed into the grand atrium and immediately found themselves surrounded by a squad of the most vicious looking goblins ever to make an appearance at the ministry of magic. Rather than being alarmed, the group took great comfort from the close proximity of these warrior beings. The fact that all their razor sharp weapons were pointing away from them might have had something to do with that comfort. Their squad of guards parted to allow Ragnok, Amelia and Croaker to enter their protected bubble.

The goblin leader nodded in recognition to the young couple before greeting them. "On behalf of the goblin nation, I would like to offer our congratulations on your marriage and best wishes for tonight. On a personal note, I would once again like to offer my apologies for not attending your nuptials. Tonight is also an important occasion for my race and I felt, as their leader, I should supervise all the arrangements in person. This is a great thing you do for all magical occupants of our country, your goblin friends certainly appreciate the risks and sacrifices you are making to rid us all of this evil."

Harry bowed to the goblin leader as a mark of respect, and also to show his thanks. "Tonight would not have been possible without the great assistance my wife and I have received from our goblin friends. I shall make a point of ensuring that the rest of the country is made aware of those facts. They may trust you with their gold but tonight you are ensuring the safety of something much more precious to me, for that you have my thanks." Harry's arm possessively around Hermione left no one in any doubt just what he meant as both teens now bowed to the goblin leader.

As Croaker led the party in the direction of the designated room, Sirius could have sworn the goblin guards that surrounded them now held themselves just that little bit taller. Seeing the way their leader had greeted the Potters would account for some of that but Sirius was sure that Harry's answer was the major reason. Calling them goblin friends and bowing in respect to Ragnok had just elevated their status as far as the guards were concerned.

Sirius had been trying not to think of the future in case he jinxed tonight but what he was watching here forced his thoughts down that road. The Potters were currently in the company of three of Magical Britain's most politically powerful figures, and were handling it as if

they were out for a stroll down the park. Sirius hadn't wanted to pile any more worries onto Dan and Emma but if, no, when these two pulled this off, the entire country would offer them anything they wanted.

Fudge was finished, only Harry's intervention had saved the man's job at the trial. Handing out ministerial pardons without even reading them just emphasised what a lame duck minister he was. The fact that the entire country listened live as the drama had unfolded meant his goose was already cooked. If he would behave that irresponsibly for a wizard the entire auror department was actively hunting, what else would he sign unread?

Considering Croaker's preference for working behind the scenes, Amelia was a shoo-in for the soon to be vacant minister's job, if she wanted it. With tonight's ritual hopefully draining all Voldemort's marked followers of their magic, she might think the time is right to pass on the directorship of the DMLE to someone else for her shot at sorting the country out. At the very least, Croaker and Amelia would have a major influence in just who got elected to the top post. That both of them had already offered employment to Harry and Hermione was amazing, but Sirius would be willing to bet Ragnok would soon be doing the same.

The marauder was praying their family could all sit down on Black Island and spend the next few weeks discussing what they were going to do next. Apart from arranging the honeymoon, no one had looked any further than tonight. Those were conversations Sirius was looking forward to, the alternative was unthinkable.

The ritual was almost scuppered before it even began, Emma had a death grip on both teens and didn't want to let go. Dan was forced to reluctantly pry his now sobbing wife's fingers loose one at a time before Tonks could shepherd them through the door. As it closed behind the trio, Sirius had to conjure a chair for Emma to be guided into as her legs would no longer support her. All three were now re-evaluating their opinions from earlier, being inside that room couldn't be any worse than waiting out here.

Tonks would certainly disagree with that. She had been checking out the circular room that appeared to have mist for a ceiling, immediately noticing the large goblin rune stones around the wall to prevent outside interference. Her eyes were then quickly drawn to

the ritual pentagram, enclosed within in a circle that was etched into the marble floor. It may be surrounded by symbols the auror didn't recognise but there was no mistaking the material used, the entire ensemble was etched into the floor using pure gold. She was drawn out of her observations by virtue of having an irate Harry Potter in her face.

"If they expect me to do this with Hermione on the bloody floor then it ends right now. Who the hell came up with this and why weren't we told beforehand?"

Harry was soothed somewhat by a pair of arms encircling him from behind, Hermione whispering in his ear helped pull his temper down a few more degrees. "It's alright love, I knew this before I stepped through the door. We can't risk anything interfering with the ritual, that's more important than a bit of discomfort."

"You deserve a lot better than shagging on the floor Hermione, this is just so wrong."

"We won't be shagging Harry, I'll be making love with my husband. We'll have years to wear out as many beds as we want, doing it on the floor this first time will give us those years."

Harry turned around and now held his new wife in his arms. "I'll spend the rest of my life doing my best to make sure you never regret tonight Hermione, I love you so much."

"Well, I've had this fantasy about me and you on a deserted beach, naked under the moonlight. We do this right tonight, you can spend the next few weeks making my fantasy become reality. You remember the words?"

Harry leaned down and kissed her. "Of course I do, we practiced this for hour upon hour."

Hermione kissed his scar before slowly uniting and removing Harry's robe. As his only item of clothing landed on a clear part of the floor, Harry began kissing Hermione's neck while her robe soon joined its partner.

Tonks became nothing more than an invisible spectator as the two teens forgot about everything except each other. The mist started its

descend from the ceiling while a golden light began to surround the couple as they slowly and sensually waltzed naked into the centre of the prepared ritual area. Tonks was certain the room's own magic was adding to the love the couple shared for each other. This light cast the auror deeper into shadow as she watched them begin the ritual, Harry's first chant saw his scar react violently and begin to weep a treacle-like substance. Tonks thought Harry must be in severe pain but his voice never faltered as he offered the correct response to Hermione's answering chant. Tonks had her wand in her hand and tried to be ready for whatever happened next as the golden etchings on the floor began to pulse with magic in rhythm to their chanting.

-oOoOo-

Tom Riddle knew there was very little left of his once great intellect. His mind had disintegrated to the point where he felt like a child, hiding in the corner of what was once a magnificent room. Madness was slowly snatching all he had studied, strived and suffered to amass away from him a piece at a time. He supposed that using the word slowly could technically be incorrect, currently Tom had no means by which to measure the passing of time.

That fateful Halloween night, when his spirit had been agonisingly ripped from his body, that same spirit still had enough strength to flee the scene before Dumbledore showed up. Tom spent the best part of the next decade possessing small animals, painstakingly and slowly building up his reserves until Quirrell blundered along.

Discovering he couldn't actually touch the Potter brat was another life-changing moment but at least he was able to absorb enough energy by passing through the boy to escape from Hogwarts. His current predicament was at least a hundred times worse than either of those two incidents.

By the time the inferi had ripped apart that feeble body he was residing in, Tom was all out of options. He'd spent every piece of energy he possessed venting his rage against the inferi and that useless servant Wormtail was already in pieces, as was his beloved Nagini. It's impossible to take energy from a creature that's already dead, leaving Tom stuck in a prison of his own making. With the locket now gone from the font, the glow faded within the hour. By this time all the inferi were long gone, back under the surface of their

watery trap to await the appearance of their next victim, leaving Tom completely alone in his self-built and heavily warded prison.

As a spirit, Tom had no sense of smell, taste or touch. Possessing an animal for even a little while saw these senses return with a vengeance. The problem here was that not even a mouse could make it into the sealed cavern, denying him that ability and option. By far the worst problem though was as a direct result of the senses he did retain. There was not so much as a glimmer of light for his eyes to adjust to, nor even a heartbeat present for him to hear. Tom Riddle currently floated in what could easily be considered the equivalent of a giant sensory deprivation tank, and it was causing him to lose his mind a piece at a time.

In the beginning, the hallucinations had been company of sorts. Listening to that old muggle caretaker he'd killed, complaining about the injustice of it all, had actually been amusing for a while. Tom now recognised that the appearance of the Potters signalled the beginning of his decent into madness. Every person he'd harmed in his life was now making an appearance in his mind to berate Tom Riddle for his actions, and there was no respite or escape from this torment. Children Tom didn't know he still remembered from those hateful orphanage days would scream at him about how his actions way back then had ruined their lives. The great and powerful Lord Voldemort simply never believed it to be possible, that there could be a fate worse than death. Since Tom Riddle was now being forced to experience that fate, he'd definitely changed his mind.

That Black had found his horcrux offered Tom the faintest of hopes that some day one of the others he'd created might be discovered and activated, either deliberately by one of his followers or a fortunate accident. It needed to be soon though, otherwise the most feared dark lord in history would be resurrected as a drooling imbecile. Should a horcrux be fully activated, his spirit would be summoned to his new body. If he possessed a body when a horcrux was activated, it would stay as a spirit and be drawn directly back to strengthen him. This was the safeguard built into the horcrux anchor system, otherwise there could be multiple versions of him occupying the same time frame. Other than the limit of a few hours while using a time turner, this was not something the laws of magic would ever allow.

When the bit of him that was still Tom felt the first pull on his spirit, he understood at once that he'd lost. While the feral part of his mind fought and cursed this fate with everything it had left, he calmly accepted the outcome. Tom Marvolo Riddle aka Lord Voldemort longed for and now welcomed the release and peace death would bring. Whatever awaited him on the other side, it had to be better than the utter torture this existence had become.

-oOoOo-

When a crying Tonks came out the door, Emma let out a wail of agony while Dan remained focused on the smile the auror was wearing. Sirius quickly spoke for them all. "For Merlin's sake Tonks, we're dying here!"

"Sorry folks, that was the most beautiful and moving thing I've ever seen. They're both fine and I believe this is what you're after Croaker?"

She handed over a small jar of coal-black gunk to the unspeakable. "Harry's scar burst open and this is what came out. It looked an exceedingly painful process but Harry didn't seem to feel any discomfort, I think the room's magic really helped them. With the amount of love in that room, Voldemort never stood a chance."

Croaker confirmed that the residue was indeed from Voldemort and that it was destroyed.

Dan had a mightily relieved but still crying Emma in his arms, he offered what comfort he could to his wife. "At least if Hermione's pregnant, they managed to finish the bastard for good."

Tonks was still smiling though. "I conjured that jar to collect the residue, then I conjured them a bed. I cast the contraceptive charm on Hermione before I left, I really don't need to see them making love. The room's power and the goblin wards had Voldemort out of Harry before they reached the conclusion of the ritual. They will certainly be soul bound when they come out of there but Hermione won't be pregnant."

Sirius let out a wild victory whoop as he leapt into the air in celebration. "Voldemort suffered premature ejaculation and now our kids don't need to have pups for a good few years!"

Dan thought that was probably the worst joke he'd ever heard but still found himself laughing hysterically at it. The father now knew he could cope with the reality that his daughter was married to a wonderful young lad, it was always the thought of her being pregnant so young in life that gave him the most trouble. This was the result he had prayed for as Dan now held his wife tighter and cried tears of his own. That both he and Emma now wore wide smiles as they cried told its own story. The atmosphere outside the room was now almost festive, Sirius for one was ready to party the rest of the night away.

Amelia though had her practical head on. "Ok, we need to see if this event had the effect we thought it should. Would you like to take a walk down to the holding cells Croaker? I had an old friend of yours shipped over from Azkaban to act as a test case. If Rookwood loses his magic, we can assume it will be the same for the rest of the death eaters."

This news certainly brightened up the unspeakable's night. "I haven't seen dear Augustus since we sent the traitorous bastard to spend the rest of his miserable life with the dementors. He cost some very good people their lives, if anyone deserves to lose their magic then it's him."

"It also makes me wonder how many people will be missing from work come Monday. Let's go check our suspicions for ourselves. We shouldn't be too long."

It was Tonks who answered. "Take your time boss, I don't think those two will be coming out of there anytime soon."

For some reason that appeared to tickle the goblin's funny bones, with Ragnok leading the guards in loud laughter.

-oOoOo-

Albus couldn't remember the last time he heard laughter, there wasn't much to laugh about inside Azkaban. No, it wasn't laughter that was disturbing his sleep, rather the screaming of his fellow prisoners. That Albus though he recognised Severus' voice amongst the screams really had him concerned. He repeatedly shouted his friend's name but was being drowned out by all the noise. Albus

then began shouting for the guard before realising they had their hands full, the dementors were leaving the wing. It must have been at least an hour later when a guard opened the tiny barred hatch on the door to check on him.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes I'm fine, what happened? Was that Severus I heard screaming?"

"We don't know how it happened but something has removed all the magic from the marked death eaters. You know the effect being close to dementors has on muggles, they were all going crazy until we managed to take the dementors away."

Dumbledore took a few steps away from the door, that was enough to back him into the cell wall. He could only think of one outcome that could generate such a phenomenon, causing him to slide down the wall and sit on the cold stone floor. If they had indeed permanently eradicated Voldemort, and all his marked followers, then he really would be spending the rest of his life in this shithole. With Minerva dead and Severus now a muggle, both his friends had paid a high price for following Albus Dumbledore.

With the dementors withdrawn and the guards busy elsewhere, Albus understood he would never have a better chance than this to follow Minerva into the next great adventure. Whether or not he had the courage to follow it through was another matter.

-oOoOo-

Harry held his naked wife in his arms and uttered the words he really didn't want to say. "I think we need to get up love, our family will be going nuts outside."

This appeared to have the opposite effect than his suggestion implied as Hermione just snuggled in more. "Don't wanna, too comfy. Tonks will have already told them we're okay."

"Tonks left ages ago Hermione, and you know your mother won't believe that until she sees it with her own eyes."

Hermione lifted her head up to gently kiss Harry's lips. "Our mother my love, and I hate that you are right. The book said we would need to be close to each other for a while after the bonding but I just never want to let you go ever again. Your scar appears so much fainter now, how do you feel?"

"Wonderful! I could never feel my scar unless Tom was close or very angry but I can feel you. I can feel that you are happy and contented and it's the most fantastic feeling in the world."

"I can feel you too darling, and it just blows me away the amount of love you have for me. This should certainly help us adjust to our marriage as we'll both be able to sense how the other is feeling."

"Yeah, and you must feel I don't want to get up either, but I really think we need to." Harry then tried to sweeten the deal. "There's a perfectly good bed waiting on us back home in our room, and we could take another shower?"

"I knew I married a smart wizard, time to face the folks."

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Tonks prediction proved correct as Amelia and Croaker returned before the newlyweds emerged, their confirmation that the death eaters would indeed lose their magic was more good news.

"I think we need to get this story to the Daily Prophet in time for tomorrows edition, I even had Croaker here take a few pictures at the wedding to run with it. I have no intention of mentioning the fate of all the death eaters, merely that the Potters undertook a soul bound ritual to finish off Voldemort for good."

Amelia could see some doubt coming from concerned guardians and parents so tried to put their minds at rest. "I think it would be safe to say Voldemort created a connection between himself and the baby Harry, and that Harry's soul bond with Hermione severed that connection forever. Let those so-called journalists discover the connection between the number and type of people suddenly losing their magic."

She then addressed Ragnok directly. "I agree totally with the Potters in that this entire venture could have ended so differently without the

help of our goblin friends, and I intend to state so in the Prophet. I don't want to use the word 'horcrux' if we can possibly avoid it though."

"I agree totally on the horcrux matter and thank you for the public acknowledgement. If you will now excuse me, I feel it's going to be a busy night at the bank. So many pureblood families have just lost their head of house and other members will need to be notified of that."

The goblin leader had barely left when the newlyweds appeared from the room, to be totally engulfed in hugs by their family. Emma kept hugging and kissing whichever one of her children she managed to get hold of before Amelia brought both teens up to speed.

Hermione had an all-important, non-negotiable demand. "I want to see whatever wedding picture you intend to put in the paper first." No one there felt inclined to argue with her and the choice was quickly made.

The goblin guards stayed with them until the group portkeyed back home. Goodnight kisses were then exchanged as the Potters headed up to their room, leaving the others to spill all the details to Remus. As he filled their glasses, Sirius then gave the Grangers their last bit of good news for the night.

"Winky brews the best hangover potion it has ever been my privilege to taste!"

-oOoOo-

Wizarding Britain woke up to a different world that Sunday morning, the front page of the Prophet left very few lives untouched.

Molly Weasley was dripping tears over the wonderful picture. Harry and Hermione were staring into each other's eyes, with Madam Bones clearly visible in the background between them. She obviously had just completed the ceremony because the two teens leant into one another and began to kiss. Molly didn't take time to appreciate the headline 'Killer Kiss', nor the story of how this spelled the beginning of the end for the dark lord. Molly was more concerned about what her stupidity had done to her family.

"Oh Arthur, Ron, Ginny and the twins will be devastated when they see this. Ron's two best friends get married and he finds out about it from the Prophet, all because his mother couldn't keep her nose out of other people's business. How am I going to make it up to them?"

Arthur nervously cleared his throat, knowing this could go very badly. Keeping secrets from Molly was not a good idea. "Well love, you see I was under a secrecy oath, Amelia demanded it. Now that it's all over the paper I guess it should be safe enough."

He now had his wife's undivided attention and figured the best thing to do would be to tell her the entire story. "Amelia arranged for Ron to get thrown out of Hogwarts on Friday..."

"WHAT!"

"Oh, he wasn't really thrown out, it was all a ruse to get him out the castle without arousing anyone's suspicion. The death eaters had been hunting for Harry, burned Hermione's house to the ground."

"Oh that poor girl, was anyone hurt? Do they have a place to stay?"

"No one was hurt and they are all staying at a secret location. So secret, even with my oath I don't know where it is."

"What's all this got to do with Ron?"

"Harry and Hermione wanted him at their wedding, Ron was their best man at the ceremony."

Molly was now really crying. "Even after what I did, they still wanted our Ronald there?"

Arthur was now trying to comfort his wife, though his words just made Molly feel worse. "They apparently wanted all of our children there, and their other friends too! Amelia was too afraid it might tip off the death eaters that something was happening, which is why they devised the elaborate plan to get Ron away from the castle. Doing that with too many students though would have raised suspicions, especially if they were all friends of Harry and Hermione."

Molly managed to get her sobs under control long enough to at least make some sense. "I sent the girl Harry just married, and is now soul bound to, a howler. They'll never forgive me but at least they're still going to stay friends with our children. That's really more than I deserve."

Arthur poured Molly a fresh cup of tea from the pot, she looked like she needed it. Knowing his wife as he did, and the things she was wont to say in a howler, Arthur also had to agree with her conclusion. Harry and Hermione staying friends with their children was way more than they deserved. Perhaps time would eventually heal the rift, it might even make Molly think twice before speaking her mind. Now that would be an achievement worthy of the front page of the Prophet.

-oOoOo-

Ron was also studying the Prophet, with a delighted Susan sitting beside him. For some reason none of the rest of the household had made it down to breakfast yet. Ron eyed the happy Hufflepuff suspiciously. "You knew about this?"

"When they discovered Dumbledore was going to use love potions on me and Harry, Hermione thought it was only fair I understood why. Last night was very dangerous for them, it could have cost both Harry and Hermione their lives. I hardly slept a wink."

"How come they couldn't tell me?"

"They told hardly anyone, even the minister for magic didn't know the full story." Susan could see Ron building himself up for an argument so decided to cap the volcano before it could erupt. "Look Ron, out of all the people in Hogwarts, who did they go to a tremendous amount of trouble to make sure that person could be here this weekend?"

Ron was floundering so Susan pushed home her advantage. "Hermione has been wonderful to me and their support has meant there's been no backlash over the potions thing. Remember what happened to Hermione last time? We've grown quite close since then but they still wanted their best friend at their wedding."

Ron really couldn't argue with that and Professor Lupin's arrival stopped him pursuing it any further, he was too busy listening to the answers to Susan's questions.

"How is everyone after last night?"

"Knackered probably describes it best, it was a rough night for everyone."

"What happens next Professor?"

"Well, you, me and Ron will be returning to Hogwarts today..."

Ron couldn't help but butt in at this point. "What about Harry and Hermione, are they coming back with us?"

Remus just smiled at Ron's naivety. "Your friends got married yesterday Ron, a wedding is usually followed by a honeymoon."

"Okay, but after that?"

"I honestly don't know, and I doubt very much whether they know themselves yet. Everyone's focus was on last night, there wasn't much planning done for what happens now."

Again, Ron could understand that, didn't make him feel any better though. "Hogwarts just isn't the same without Harry and Hermione, I really miss them both."

Remus and Susan echoed those sentiments but they, like everyone else, would just have to wait and see what happened next.

-oOoOo-

If the chaos caused by today's Prophet was any indication, Hogwarts might never be the same again. It was hard to decipher what part of the story caused the biggest stir inside the castle, that the dark lord was no more or that Harry Potter was now married and soul bound to Hermione. Again the mixture of jubilation and indignation washed right over an uninterested Draco, he had his own problems to deal with. What did garner his undivided attention though was a somewhat majestic owl that arrived with a letter for

him, or rather recognising that the seal on the letter was from the Gnomes of Zurich.

With shaking hands, Draco removed the letter and broke the seal. What he read there changed his life forever. Draco was shaken out of his now pleasant daydreams by Goyle shoving a similar letter he'd received from Gringotts in his face.

"Draco, this says I'm now going to be head of my family. Does that mean something's happened to my da?"

Draco cast his eyes up and down the Slytherin table to see who else had received letters from their family's bankers. In a matter of moments, he understood what was happening here. All the eldest son's of death eaters were staring at letters like the one he and Greg held. Draco had no idea of the how but Potter hadn't just finished off the dark lord.

At that precise moment, Draco would have knelt and kissed Potter's feet. Shit, he would even have kissed the mudblood's tootsies. Then his sense of worth reasserted itself, Malfoy's bowed to no one. That Potter's intervention meant that Draco and his mother were no longer destitute would certainly buy the Gryffindors some slack, but not too far. He was still a Malfoy and a Slytherin, though one that vowed to be as unlike his bastard of a father as it was possible to be. Draco also wanted to restore some honour to his family name, that same honour would demand he acknowledge the debt the Malfoys now owed the Potters. Considering the future that had been facing both him and his mother before the Potters' actions, Draco thought he could live with that.

He wouldn't be able to touch the money until he was seventeen, unless he allowed his present guardian to act on his behalf. That would be no problem as far as Draco was concerned, shit - he might even have his mother get the Potters a wedding present! He needed to write to his mother at once, and tell her all their problems were solved. First though he needed to answer the worried boy sitting beside him.

"Yeah Greg, I think it's safe to say something has happened to both our fathers."

Draco then shot out of the great hall, he'd a letter to write before heading to the owlery.

-oOoOo-

Draco would have been delighted to see exactly what had happened to his father.

Lucius woke in a lot of pain, and in strange surroundings. He was lying in a bed but there all his knowledge ran out, he currently had tubes sticking out his body that were attached to things that produced a bleeping noise.

This drew a young woman dressed in white who changed a bag of fluid. Noticing the patient was now awake, the nurse attempted to speak with him. Obviously realising that Lucius wasn't local, she tried German and French before getting a response to English.

"Ah, British. We will contact your consulate at once. The people that mugged you took everything, including all your identification. Can you tell us your name?"

It all came back to Lucius in a rush. Feeling unwell, so leaving the establishment early to head back to his hotel room in the magical section of the city. Stepping into the alleyway only to discover that for some reason he couldn't apparate came as a bit of a shock. His second major discovery of the evening was that the alley hadn't been as deserted as he first thought, that paled into insignificance though when measured against his third discovery of the night. When the four people approached him, their intent glaringly obvious, Lucius' sneer was going full blast as he drew his wand. The sneer turned to shock and then terror as no magic left his wand. These actions were the cause of much laughter amongst his attackers before they swatted the stick away, then expertly began to beat him senseless.

His current circumstances hit Lucius like a bludger. He had no magic, which on its own was his worst nightmare. That this also meant he couldn't access his hotel room and all his money in the bank would now be gone certainly didn't improve the situation. He'd just lost his magic, as well as every single thing he owned, so the now muggle death eater did the only thing left available to him. Lucius Malfoy

began screaming hysterically until a stinging pain in his hip saw him gradually lose consciousness.

The nurse and doctor were holding a conversation about the certain types of tourists who frequented the area where this one had been found, and also how certain sections of the locals now made a living by preying off them. They fully expected this John Doe's passport, credit cards and other belongings to have already made their way through the black market system.

They had no idea that four muggers were currently celebrating their extreme good fortune after discovering that their blond victim had no papers or cards, but something much more profitable. Gold was a universal currency, accepted the world over and practically untraceable, especially in the criminal underworld.

-oOoOo-

Amelia had issued an emergency summons to her entire department, wanting to see if anyone was missing before issuing instructions regarding their duties for Monday morning. Not every auror would be there though, Tonks would continue with her assignment to protect the Potters. If that duty saw the young auror spending her time on a tropical beach, Amelia had to concede she had earned it. Amelia was considering all three members of the trio for top honours, with only the actual designation of the award up for discussion.

Amelia also had a massive personal decision to make. Should she leave her current post to take charge of the ministry? Two factors were currently preying on her mind. Her niece deserved to grow up in a magical society where Susan and others like her don't have to worry about the threat of imperius curses or love potions. The other factor was even simpler, Amelia couldn't think of anyone else who could do a better job than she could.

There would be a wave of popular support for the Potters right across their society, and Hermione had practically guaranteed Amelia's election with the wedding picture she chose for the Prophet. Every reader could clearly see Amelia smiling as she told Harry he could now kiss his new bride, Fudge would have sold his grandmother for positive publicity like that.

Having been involved in the final solution to Voldemort and his death eaters, Amelia was one of the few who understood that their society stood at a crossroads. The direction the ministry took in the coming months would determine their society's future for generations to come. When faced with that reality, Amelia really only had one choice she could make. She would put her name forward as a candidate to be the next minister, just as soon as she explained to Fudge why it was in his best interests to resign from that position.

-oOoOo-

After the revelations in the Prophet, Remus and Susan returning to Hogwarts was a logical conclusion. Ron's reappearance raised more than a few eyebrows, especially amongst his three siblings.

"Well, well, well, there's a sight to make my eyes sore."

"Don't you mean a sight for sore eyes Fred?"

"I think I got it right the first time George. This mongrel not only has the audacity to beat our detention record, he then goes and gets himself thrown out of Hogwarts as well."

Ginny pushed through the twins to get a good gander at Ron. "He looks okay though, I thought mum would at least have scalped him. Did she have you degnoming the garden all weekend?"

"What are you lot talking about? I haven't been near the Burrow."

This certainly grabbed all three Weasley's attentions. Ginny was still closest so asked the obvious question. "Where were you then?"

"Oh, Harry and Hermione arranged everything, I spent the weekend with them. Who else do you think would be best man at their wedding?"

The total shock at this ludicrous statement stopped anyone answering Ron's question, before rapidly leading to him being mobbed as everyone demanded details on the wedding of this and any other decade. Ron found himself centre stage, with the entire school hanging on his every word. Once more life was good for Ron Weasley, and once more it was due to the Potters. Ron supposed

he would need to get used to calling them that though it would take a bit of remembering.

Ron drew so much attention that Susan approaching Cedric, Fleur and Viktor went unnoticed, and that was just the way the little Hufflepuff liked it.

-oOoOo-

The six of them were sitting around the bluebell fire Hermione had conjured on the beach, comfortable in each other's company as the sun slowly sank into the ocean. Sirius had a guitar on his knee but the few chords he could strum could hardly be considered music, the rhythmic and relaxing sound of the surf greeting the beach was providing the main soundtrack as they chatted the evening away. Harry and Hermione were the first to break from the circle as they claimed it was time to turn in, the four remaining adults all pretending not to notice as the newlyweds strolled passed their cottage and headed further down the beach. As the couple were swallowed up by the darkness, Sirius stopped strumming long enough to say what he was thinking.

"I'm beginning to wonder if I did the right thing by arranging for some of their friends to come out here for the weekend?"

Tonks quickly set him straight. "Oh I think you were right to have Susan ask them, the last thing we want is those two becoming isolated from their friends. It will also give us some idea of what's happening back home, and help them decide what they're going to do next."

Emma was leaning into her husband, feeling more relaxed than she had in months. Since meeting Harry off the train just before Christmas, it almost felt as if they were on a roller coaster ride. The difference being that this roller coaster didn't let you see what was coming next, and you had to build the track while still on the ride. Even with everything they had lost, Emma still wouldn't change a thing. Harry had hit the nail right on the head that morning they discovered what a pensieve could do. Life wasn't about the memories and mementoes they'd lost, it was about all those memories they still had to create. Glancing around her, Emma couldn't help but smile with the thought that Harry was certainly helping them create some wonderful new ones.

"I wouldn't be against them going back to Hogwarts now that the teaching personnel have changed, though Harry would have returned to the Dursleys over my dead body."

She could feel Dan shaking against her and turned her head to see the wide grin on his face, and mischief in his eyes. "Daniel Granger, I recognise that look. What have you been up to?" This proved too much for Dan, he couldn't hold it any longer and burst out laughing.

"Okay, I know when I'm busted. I've been dying to tell you all anyway. It suddenly dawned on me that, after promising to be in touch, we never answered the Dursleys on how the Harry / Hermione situation resolved itself. I sent them a couple of prints from their wedding and told them not to expect Harry at the summer. I might also have let slip that we would all be spending time on Lord Black's private tropical island. We need to take some pictures of them along with their friends when they arrive here, we did promise after all!"

Sirius stared at Dan in awe as the laughter built from his toes up, this appeared to be the reaction of Tonks too as both of them were soon helpless with laughter. Emma kissed her husband to show her approval before voicing a challenge.

"We're four smart people here, there must be a way for us to see their reaction when they open the next envelope? I would have given anything to see their reaction to the first."

That got them focused as Emma thought there were worse ways to spend an evening than brainstorming with your family on a tropical beach.

-oOoOo-

Harry led his wife along the deserted beach until they reached the little cove with the surprise that the elves had helped him arrange. A small decking area had been built on the sand, surrounded by poles from which hung coloured lanterns. Sitting on a table in one of the corners was a portable CD player, along with a selection of discs.

"I made a promise that night in the ministry that I would help turn your fantasies into reality, I hope this is just the first of many." As the music started, Hermione melted into his arms.

She was carried along by the music and the romance of the entire situation. As her husband slowly led her around the improvised dance floor, Hermione caught sight of the four poster bed Harry must have arranged to be here.

For the first time in her life, Hermione Potter thought a book was wrong. The information on soul bonds had said a couple would have to stay close for around forty eight hours. That time had come and long gone, leaving Hermione feeling no different. She wanted her Harry in her arms for the rest of their lives. Through their soul bond, she could tell that Harry was banking on her to be there too. That was a future they all could live with.

The End

A/N Thanks for reading

A/N2 Just closed the poll on my profile page with over seventy percent of voters wanting to see 'Taking the P.I.S.S.' posted here. My intention is to finish 'A Different Halloween' before moving onto any other projects, we shall see.